

Joe Biden's Indo-Pacific Diplomacy

Author: Jakub Graca

Consultation: Paweł Paszak

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Main points:

- Despite the ambiguity and scarcity of Joe Biden's statements on China during the election campaign, as well as his links to the moderately successful Barack Obama's team, the new US administration has undertaken rather resolved and consistent measures during the first four months of its tenure.
- Biden's Asian policy seems to have already been, and it probably will continue to be, a mixture of Obama's and Trump's. It is not justified to speak of a third Obama term, but an utter withdrawal from Trump's rupture with conventional perceptions would be neither right nor desirable.
- The direction delineated by the 46th president is mostly a proper one and the vital interests of the US, as well as its key allies in Asia are convergent (mostly in terms of security), but the question is whether Biden's team will have sufficient perseverance to achieve its objectives without yielding to the brazenness of foes (Russia) or particular interests and whims of the friends (for instance Germany).

Before Joe Biden took an oath as the 46th President of the United States on January 20, 2021, one of the main conundrums that analysts of international relations used to face was how the newly elected Commander-in-Chief will approach the key region of Indo-Pacific. Some contended¹ that Biden's first term would actually be a third of Barack Obama, whose administration had made a formal "*pivot*" to Asia in the early 2010s aimed at countering rising China and taken preliminary administrative and diplomatic steps, but it failed to achieve convincing results. It was no secret that Joe Biden would rely on a selection of individuals who worked with him as Vice President in 2009-2017 and with his boss as well. Others argued that the perception of China among Washington's establishment has, in principle, not changed substantially since Donald Trump had offered a dramatic acceleration of US anti-China policy, a part of which brought considerable results, elevating the great power competition to the next level and effectively raising the question of China on the international forum.

¹ Blow, Charles M. „Third Term of the Obama Presidency”. *The New York Times*. Nov. 8, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/08/opinion/biden-obama-presidency.html>.
Singh, Maanvi. “Joe Biden says ‘this is not a third Obama term’ in first sit-down interview”. *The Guardian*. Nov. 25, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/nov/24/joe-biden-nbc-interview-presidency>.

There were also concerns among Quad partners, especially India, that Biden will drop or modify the Indo-Pacific strategy of his predecessor. While Donald Trump has been widely criticised for antagonising allies or polarising political debates in the US, the contribution of his administration towards promoting the concept of the Indo-Pacific should not be disputed. The transfer of power in Washington was also met with some apprehension in Taiwan, where Donald Trump was perceived as one of the most pro-Taiwanese US presidents who has given the green light to large arms transfers and a high-level state visit of Alex Azar, then the US Secretary of Health and Human Services.

The initial concept

During the presidential campaign, the only meaningful source of Joe Biden’s foreign policy vision was his article in “*Foreign Affairs*” published in spring 2020 under the title “*Why America must lead again*”². Then, the democratic candidate outlined a comprehensive and coherent concept of his approach to world issues, a bulk of which was devoted to Asia. *“To win the competition for the future against China or anyone else, the United States must sharpen its innovative edge and unite the economic might of democracies around the world to counter abusive economic practices and reduce inequality”*³. In Biden’s opinion, Donald Trump undermined the credibility and influence of the US abroad and devastated alliances to which Biden referred multiple times thereafter as force multipliers. All the more vital in the light of an exacerbating great power competition which requires the US to rejuvenate multilateralism and *“lead again”*⁴ (*“On its own, the United States represents about a quarter of global GDP. When we join together with fellow democracies, our strength more than doubles”*⁵). The self-centred *“America First”*, a vital indicator of which is governing from the position of power, needs to be replaced by the leadership from the position of a domestic power (the United States needs to lead *“not just with the example of our power, but also with the power of our example”*⁶). **Internal affairs were the focal point of Joe Biden’s campaign**

² Biden, Joe. „Why America Must Lead Again”. *Foreign Affairs*. March/April 2020. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-01-23/why-america-must-lead-again>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

because – according to the current incumbent President – the external effectiveness can be derived solely out of internal force.

With the exception of the aforementioned piece, the former senator from Delaware did not speak much about China over the course of his exceptionally sluggish campaign, nor did he treat the sphere of international politics effusively which appeared at complete variance with an aggressive anti-China rhetoric and policy conducted by his Republican opponent Donald Trump. The two presidential debates, as well as the debate of running mates, did very little to comprehend the topic, likewise the essay written for *“The Atlantic”* in early December 2020 in which Joe Biden profusely explained the reasons why he had chosen Lloyd Austin as his Secretary of Defense without having mentioned China or Indo-Pacific a single time⁷.

What used to draw criticism or at least fuel doubts about the future of US Asian policy, was that certain Biden’s statements delivered numerous times on several occasions may have seemed startling or even inconsistent. **As recently as in May 2019, during the early days of the campaign, he said that China was “not a competition for us” (“China is going to eat our lunch? Come on, man”⁸) for which he was pilloried both by his political friends (for example, Bernie Sanders⁹) and foes (Donald Trump: “Joe Biden is a dummy”¹⁰).** During a CNN Town Hall in September 2020 Biden labeled Russia as an “opponent” whilst China was dubbed a “serious competitor”¹¹. At another CNN Town Hall in February 2021, the 46th US President made some ambiguous remarks on China’s treatment of Uyghurs and its clampdown on Hong Kong and how the US should approach these issues¹². Different interpretations of Biden’s word appeared, but what the problem consists of actually is that Biden is not a skilled orator, his speech is vague and it doesn’t fully reflect his views, not to mention the conduct of his administration.

⁷ Biden, Joe. „Why I Chose Lloyd Austin as Secretary of Defense”. *The Atlantic*. Dec. 8, 2020. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/12/secretary-defense/617330/>.

⁸ Sonmez, Felicia. “Biden says China is ‘not competition for us,’ prompting pushback from both parties”. *The Washington Post*. May 2, 2019. https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/biden-says-china-is-not-competition-for-us-prompting-pushback-from-republicans/2019/05/01/4ae4e738-6c68-11e9-a66d-a82d3f3d96d5_story.html.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Bloomberg Quicktake: Now. “Trump Slams 'Loser, Dummy' Joe Biden Ahead of Competing Iowa Events”. *Youtube*. 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cn0buXS5N3E>.

¹¹ Rummler, Orion. “Biden calls Russia an “opponent,” sees China as a “serious competitor””. *Axios*. Sep. 18, 2020. <https://www.axios.com/biden-russia-china-trump-cnn-town-hall-c4489bf5-bf1c-491f-8327-493367f769bb.html>.

¹² “Joe Biden Wisconsin CNN Town Hall Transcript February 16”. <https://www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/joe-biden-wisconsin-cnn-town-hall-transcript-february-16>.

Key Nominations

Personnel policy is always consequential insofar as it sheds light on the direction in which the administration will follow and predetermines the final results. Needless to say, not all the vacancies have been filled to date. One example is a **US ambassador to China**; the other one, by far and away more essential, but rarely resonating in major media outlets, is the **Bureau of Industry and Security (BIS)**, an agency of the US Department of Commerce, which will be crucial in terms of US-China trade relations. The **Defense Innovation Unit (DIU)** within the Department of Defense can also be of use as a remarkable instance – Joe Biden has already proposed a slate of nominees, but most of them are still to be confirmed by the Senate.

Yet, the most imposing figures have already been appointed. **Antony Blinken**, 59, a career and seasoned diplomat born to a diplomatic family of Jewish origin, and a French speaker who studied both at Harvard and in Paris, became the Secretary of State. A long-time public servant, he had held various senior positions during the two previous democratic administrations (Clinton's and Obama's). He has made himself known as a proponent of multilateralism, but on the other hand, he has never shied away from supporting a military involvement when necessary¹³.

Jake Sullivan was tapped as the National Security Advisor, the second youngest in history since McGeorge Bundy (1961-66). A Yale graduate, he served as a Deputy Chief of Staff and the Director of Policy Planning when Hillary Clinton was in charge of the Department of State. He is widely known to have travelled to over 100 countries with Mrs. Clinton which helped him gain firsthand experience in diplomatic affairs. Sullivan was also a National Security Advisor to Vice President Joe Biden afterwards. During that period, he dealt with Middle Eastern affairs and is known for playing a pivotal role in talks with Iran which ended with signing the nuclear deal in 2015.

A retired general **Lloyd Austin** had to be granted a waiver from the Congress, which would exempt him from a law requiring former military officials to remain off-duty for at least seven years before assuming a civilian capacity (for the sake of civilian control over the military).

¹³ Herszenhorn, David M., Momtaz, Rym. "9 things to know about Antony Blinken, the next US secretary of state". *Politico*. Nov. 23, 2020. <https://www.politico.eu/article/nine-things-to-think-about-antony-blinken/>.

Shesgreen, Deirdre. "Antony Blinken's confirmation hearing: 5 things to know about Biden's secretary of state nominee". *USA Today*. 2020. <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/elections/2021/01/19/antony-blinken-5-things-know-bidens-secretary-state-nominee/4174535001/>.

Austin is the first African-American head of the Pentagon, which is in line with Biden's progressive agenda. Both gentlemen established a close relationship when Austin was a Commanding General of the US Forces in Iraq (from 2010), then a Vice Chief of Staff of the US Army (2012-13) and finally the US Central Commander (CENTCOM) between 2013 and 2016. He has extensive experience in Middle Eastern Affairs.

Kathleen Hicks, a PhD in political science, became the Deputy Secretary of Defense. She gained experience as a senior public servant in the Pentagon during the Obama-Biden administration and as a non-governmental fellow beforehand. She is well aware of the challenges China poses to the US and she has given expression to it multiple times thus far.

Ely Ratner will unquestionably make the news more often in the future. He is a Special Assistant to the Secretary of Defense and the director of the recently created China Task Force within the Department of Defense (DoD). He used to work with VP Biden from 2015 to 2017, and now he is expected to become the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs at the DoD.

Robert Lighthizer, the US Trade Representative in Donald Trump administration, was a vaunted China hawk who managed to amass an exceptionally huge amount of political power and garnered a lot of public attention as one of the principal architects of Trump's China policy. He has been succeeded by **Katherine Tai**, an Asian-American of modest appearance born in the US from Chinese parents and grown up in Taiwan.

Kurt Campbell, **Laura Rosenberger** and **Rush Doshi** belong to the so-called Joe Biden's China team and they constitute the core thereof, with the most significant role of Campbell who, as the coordinator of Indo-Pacific at the National Security Council, is unofficially named Biden's Asia tsar. He is widely reckoned to have spearheaded the American pivot to the Pacific as the Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs under President Barack Obama. He is the author of *"The Pivot: The Future of American Statecraft in Asia"*, a 2016 book in which he elaborated on his vision on why the US should refocus its attention to the Pacific and how to design alliances to better counter China.

Noteworthy is also the career and activity of the new commander of the US Indo-Pacific Command, **Admiral John Aquilino**, who has admitted during his confirmation hearing before the Senate that the risk of China conquering Taiwan was his biggest and lingering concern.

Therefore – he opined – the US should create deterrence capabilities along with its allies as *“this problem is much closer to us than most think”*¹⁴.

The initial steps

It was as early as in the very first days of the new administration or even slightly beforehand when initial heralds appeared of how the US Info-Pacific policy could develop. For the first time since 1979, the representative of the Republic of China (ROC) to the US and the de-facto ambassador of the island state of Taiwan to Washington Hsiao Bi-khim was invited to Joe Biden’s inauguration on the Capitol Hill and she attended the ceremony.

During his confirmation hearing at the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Antony Blinken agreed in principle with Donald Trump on his diagnosis of the US-China rivalry (*“Trump’s basic principle was the right one”*¹⁵) and admitted that a tougher approach was necessary, but said that measures should be different. He concurred with the judgment made by his predecessor, Mike Pompeo, that China has committed genocide and crimes against humanity in Xinjiang (*“That would be my judgment as well”*¹⁶).

Joe Biden hasn’t so far lifted the tariffs which the previous cabinet had imposed on China although he harshly criticised *“Trump’s trade war”* as ineffective and harmful to US manufacturers, farmers and consumers¹⁷. Gina Raimondo, the new Secretary of Commerce said the tariffs were not perfect and they *“have created challenges”*, but she acknowledged they *“have worked, insofar as they have levelled the playing field”*¹⁸. Katherine Tai admitted during her confirmation hearing that tariffs were a *“legitimate tool”* against China and, in her first interview in office, she signalled that repealing the customs duties was not going to be realistic

¹⁴ The transcript of John Aquilino public hearing. *The US Senate*. March 23, 2021. https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/21-14_03-23-2021.pdf.

¹⁵ The transcript of Antony Blinken public hearings. *The US Senate*. Jan. 19, 2021. <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/hearings/nominations-011921>.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Bermingham, Finbarr. “US Election 2020: Joe Biden faces pressure to separate China trade policy from Donald Trump’s”. *South China Morning Post*. Sep. 1, 2020. <https://www.scmp.com/economy/china-economy/article/3099757/joe-biden-faces-pressure-separate-china-trade-policy-donald>.

¹⁸ Martin, Eric, Lubbers, Payne, “Raimondo Says Chinese Metal Tariffs Are Imperfect But Leveled the Field”. *Bloomberg*. April 1, 2021. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-04-01/u-s-commerce-head-says-china-metal-duties-imperfect-even-field>.

in the foreseeable future as “*no negotiator walks away from leverage*”¹⁹. Jen Psaki, on January 25 stated: “*What we’ve seen over the last few years is that China is growing more authoritarian at home and more assertive abroad. And Beijing is now challenging our security, prosperity, and values in significant ways that require a new U.S. approach*”²⁰.

At the beginning of February, during his first visit to the Pentagon, Joe Biden announced that a special China Task Force led by Dr. Ely Ratner was established within the DoD “to provide a baseline assessment of department policies, programs and processes in regard to the challenge China poses”²¹. The group ceased to operate as initially planned after four months and it has prepared recommendations to the Pentagon leadership which will remain partially classified. The Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin has informed on initiating some administrative steps driven by the whole-of-government approach, but the details have not been made public²².

On March 3, the administration released the so-called “Interim National Security Strategic Guidance”²³, a temporary document which – alongside the speech delivered by Antony Blinken on the same day (“*A Foreign Policy for the American People*”²⁴) – is going to serve as a benchmark for the US foreign policy and national security objectives until a full-fledged National Security Strategy is published, possibly at the end of 2021. Both texts show, beyond any doubt, that the administration has a good understanding of the challenges and it is going to address them in their full complexity (Blinken: “*Our relationship with China will be competitive when it should be, collaborative when it can be, and adversarial when it must be. The common denominator is the need to engage China from a position of strength.*”²⁵)

¹⁹ Davis, Bob, Hayashi, Yuka. “New Trade Representative Says U.S. Isn’t Ready to Lift China Tariffs”. *The Wall Street Journal*. March 28, 2021. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/new-trade-representative-says-u-s-isnt-ready-to-lift-china-tariffs-11616929200>.

²⁰ Allen-Ebrahimian, Bethany, “Biden sets his sights on China”. *Axios*. Jan. 26, 2021. <https://www.axios.com/biden-administration-china-policy-trump-136a1da4-f49d-42df-9fb6-29090a589087.html>.

²¹ Garamone, Jim, “Biden Announces DOD China Task Force”. *US Department of Defense*. Feb. 10, 2021. <https://www.defense.gov/Explore/News/Article/Article/2500271/biden-announces-dod-china-task-force/>.

²² *U.S. Department Of Defense*, “Secretary Of Defense Directive On China Task Force Recommendations”. 2021. <https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Releases/Release/Article/2651534/secretary-of-defense-directive-on-china-task-force-recommendations/>.

²³ “Interim National Security Strategic Guidance”. *The White House*. March 3, 2021. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/03/03/interim-national-security-strategic-guidance/>.

²⁴ Blinken, Antony. “A Foreign Policy for the American People”. *The Department of State*. March 3, 2021. <https://www.state.gov/a-foreign-policy-for-the-american-people/>.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

Foreign diplomacy

Since the very beginning, the new administration has been tested by its Chinese counterpart in the contentious areas of the Western Pacific. Three days into Joe Biden's first term (January 23-24), the Chinese Air Force sent two large formations of aircraft (11 and 15 respectively) into Taiwan's Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ). At that time Chinese strategic bombers H-6 reportedly simulated missile attacks on the USS Theodore Roosevelt aircraft carrier transiting through the northern part of the South China Sea (SCS). The response of the Biden administration was quick and strong. On February 9, two US carrier strike groups conducted manoeuvres in the South China Sea near the Paracel Islands, to which the Chinese lay claims. The action is a continuation of Donald Trump's and Barack Obama's policy of contesting the "*nine-dash line*" through Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOP) and joint military exercises. Beijing's incursions into Taiwan's ADIZ has become commonplace over the past months with the largest one having taken place on April 12 when twenty five Chinese warplanes, among them nuclear-capable bombers, breached the Taiwanese ADIZ. Likewise, Chinese military drills in the South China Sea and the East China Sea (ECS) and provocative activities in disputed waters became more frequent, with the most testing one having occurred in April simultaneously with a Russian military buildup in Crimea. At the time, the US was preparing for joint exercises with the Philippines when China dispatched its fishing fleet to a disputed reef.

Biden's administration upheld Trump's Taiwan policy and is deepening the relationship even further. In late March, the US and Taiwan signed an agreement establishing a working group to enhance cooperation between two countries' coast guards²⁶. On April 9, the Department of State issued new guidelines for US government interactions with their Taiwanese counterparts, thus doubling down on Mike Pompeo's termination of the old guidelines in the waning days of his tenure²⁷. A few days later, an unofficial delegation consisting of Sen. Chris Dodd, James Steinberg and Richard Armitage visited Taiwan which was aimed to be a "*personal signal*" for the part of the President to show his support for the

²⁶ Reuters Staff. "Taiwan, U.S. to strengthen maritime coordination after China law". *Reuters*. March 26, 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-taiwan-usa-idUSKBN2BI00X>.

²⁷ Price, Ned. "New Guidelines for U.S. Government Interactions with Taiwan Counterparts". *Department of State*. April 9, 2021. <https://www.state.gov/new-guidelines-for-u-s-government-interactions-with-taiwan-counterparts/>.

Taiwanese cause. Yet, the US is still seeking balance between the still valid “*strategic ambiguity*” and a possible, but not yet applied “*strategic clarity*”.

Extensive measures have been adopted to rally the Indo-Pacific and European allies around the overarching goal to deter China. On March 12, the first summit of the Quad partnership at the leader-level in history has taken place. Joe Biden, as well as prime ministers of India (Narendra Modi), Australia (Scott Morrison) and Japan (Yoshihide Suga) convened remotely to reaffirm their commitment to a “*shared vision for an Indo-Pacific region that is free, open, resilient and inclusive*”²⁸ They pledged to produce in India up to 1 billion doses of a vaccine against Covid-19 by the end of 2022 in order to supply them mainly to South East Asian countries as a countermeasure against Chinese vaccine diplomacy²⁹. The plan was temporarily delayed by the outbreak of the second wave of the coronavirus pandemic in India and the reluctance of Washington to furnish its key ally with raw materials for vaccine production. Due to the initial delay in providing help to India during the second wave, the image of the USA in the country deteriorated. Despite some reputational damage, the strategic interests of both countries have been converging over China threat. The issue remains relevant more than ever, therefore it is not likely that the incident with blocking supplies will lead to a long-term setback in bilateral relations. It is currently difficult to predict how quickly the implementation of vaccine cooperation will be back on track and time is of the essence in the light of growing Chinese and Russian capabilities.

In March, Antony Blinken and Lloyd Austin betook themselves overseas for the first time while in office. The destinations of a shared visit were Japan (March 16) and South Korea (a day later). Prior to the visits, the US had finally settled a dispute with South Korea over the costs of the US military presence on the peninsula. Donald Trump had required from Korea a significantly larger financial contribution, the negotiations had been protracted, but accelerated under the new administration. Ultimately, Seoul will increase its share by 13,9% in 2021³⁰. Despite the progress in negotiations regarding burden-sharing, South Korea remains reluctant toward the adoption of the concept of Indo-Pacific – which has risen to the top of

²⁸ Biden, Joe, Modi, Narendra, Morrison, Scott, Suga, Yoshihide. “Our four nations are committed to a free, open, secure and prosperous Indo-Pacific region”. *The Washington Post*. March 13, 2021. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/03/13/biden-modi-morrison-suga-quad-nations-indo-pacific/>.

²⁹ „Covid: US and allies promise one billion jabs for South East Asia”. *BBC*. March 12, 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-56381104>.

³⁰ Sang-Hun, Choe, “South Korea Will Pay More for U.S. Troop Presence”. *The New York Times*. March 10, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/10/world/asia/US-troops-korea-payments.html>.

Washington's agenda. From Seoul's perspective, the US Indo-Pacific strategy is too confrontational toward China and could bring dire implications for its economy, similar to sanctions imposed on Hyundai in the aftermath of THAAD deployment in 2017. South Korea has so far restrained from issuing its Indo-Pacific strategy or taking any steps toward joining the Quad. Seoul also does not seem interested in actively engaging in the South China Sea joint maritime exercises, due to the concerns that it would antagonise Beijing and made normalisation of relations with Pyongyang more difficult. South Korea can be nevertheless a crucial partner for the US in more low-profile areas such as competing with Chinese FDI in ASEAN and securing some elements of supply chains.

Subsequently, Blinken joined Jake Sullivan to hold talks with their Chinese counterparts in Anchorage, Alaska. The atmosphere of the talks in Anchorage was exceptionally confrontational and abundant with harsh rhetoric. It failed to bring significant results but showed growing tensions between two great powers which might be nearing the point of no return. On March 18, Secretary Lloyd Austin held talks in India, a key security partner and an indispensable element of the US Indo-Pacific Strategy. Since the clashes in Eastern Ladakh, relations between Washington and New Delhi have gained further momentum as exemplified by the conclusion of the BECA agreement on October 27, 2020. For Biden, India is a natural partner as both countries largely share the perception of China and the vision of maritime security in the Indo-Pacific. There are some concerns regarding Hindu nationalism and flaws of Indian democracy, yet they are not enough to derail the strategic alignment of both countries. India is also a necessary partner in tackling climate change which was emphasised during the visit of John Kerry in April³¹. The Biden Administration is likely to make attempts to “*overcome the hesitations of history*”³² and sign a trade deal that has been beyond reach for decades. Washington and New Delhi have to manage their differences with regard to Russia, which on the one hand is India's trusted partner, and on the other is considered a threat by the US. Arms transfers from Russia including the S-400 system so far have prevented any significant deal.

³¹ “Special Presidential Envoy for Climate John Kerry's Visit to India and Meetings with Prime Minister and Top Officials in the Government of India”. *The Department of State*. April 8, 2021. <https://www.state.gov/special-presidential-envoy-for-climate-john-kerrys-visit-to-india-and-meetings-with-prime-minister-and-top-officials-in-the-government-of-india/>.

³² A famous quote from Narendra Modi, 2016. Pant, Harsh V., “India and the US Overcome the Hesitations of History”. *The Diplomat*. June 10, 2021. <https://thediplomat.com/2016/06/india-and-the-us-overcome-the-hesitations-of-history/>.

Prime Minister Suga of Japan was the first foreign leader to have visited the White House during Biden's tenure. The meeting took place on April 16. In a joint statement *“the United States restated its unwavering support for Japan's defense under the U.S.-Japan Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security, using its full range of capabilities, including nuclear”*³³. A relatively young term *“Indo-Pacific”* was used 19 times in the text. Both leaders agreed to expend \$4,5bn on common 5G and *“beyond 5G”* projects³⁴. Japan is also perceived as a key partner in initiatives to secure supply chains of semiconductors and other sensitive technologies. In the joint announcement, both parties included a vague goal to *“cooperate on sensitive supply chains, including semiconductors”*³⁵.

The second foreign leader hosted by Joe Biden in the White House was South Korean President Moon Jae-in (May 21) which further emphasises the importance of Asian allies to the US. The extraordinarily lengthy joint statement (officially named a *“fact sheet”*) was abundant with very concrete conclusions and commitments with regards to cutting-edge technologies, innovation, supply chains, intellectual property, vaccine cooperation as well as cybersecurity³⁶. In joint remarks at the press conference, President Moon announced that the US had pledged to supply Covid-19 vaccines for 550,000 South Korean servicemen³⁷. Time will tell this if ambitious and far-reaching plans will come to fruition and how quickly it may happen.

Biden has managed to gather, to some extent, the European allies around his Asian agenda. Antony Blinken has visited Europe four times so far. For example, collective sanctions against Chinese officials for Beijing's mistreatment of the Uyghur minority were imposed in historic joint move by the US, the UK, the EU and Canada (March 2021)³⁸. China retaliated

³³ “U.S.- Japan Joint Leaders' Statement: “U.S. – JAPAN GLOBAL PARTNERSHIP FOR A NEW ERA”. *The White House*. April 16, 2021. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/04/16/u-s-japan-joint-leaders-statement-u-s-japan-global-partnership-for-a-new-era/>.

³⁴ “Fact Sheet: U.S.-Japan Competitiveness and Resilience (CoRe) Partnership”. *The White House*. April 16, 2021. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/04/16/fact-sheet-u-s-japan-competitiveness-and-resilience-core-partnership/>.

³⁵ “U.S.- Japan Joint Leaders'...” Ibid.

³⁶ “U.S.-ROK Leaders' Joint Statement”. *The White House*. May 21, 2021. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/05/21/u-s-rok-leaders-joint-statement/>.

³⁷ “Remarks by President Biden and H.E. Moon Jae-in, President of the Republic of Korea at Press Conference”. *The White House*. May 21, 2021. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/05/21/remarks-by-president-biden-and-h-e-moon-jae-in-president-of-the-republic-of-korea-at-press-conference/>.

³⁸ “Uighurs: Western countries sanction China over rights abuses”. *BBC*. March 22, 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-56487162>.

immediately with escalatory sanctions³⁹. The Western countries did not succumb to Beijing's counterstrike. The G7 Foreign and Development Ministers' meeting in London (May 3-5) was concluded by a joint communiqué in which all the parties condemned China's human rights abuses and its crackdown on Hong Kong. They expressed support for Taiwan's participation in the WHO as well as the World Health Assembly and committed to the "*rules-based international order*"⁴⁰. And eventually, on May 24, the European Parliament (EP) overwhelmingly (599-58-30) voted in favour of suspending any consideration of the CAI (EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment⁴¹), a highly controversial agreement that was concluded at the end of December 2020 and needs to be ratified by the Parliament to enter into force. The freeze will be in place until and unless China decides to backtrack on its counter-sanctions. Beijing instantaneously announced it was not going to yield to EP's demands.

On May 21, the foreign minister of Lithuania announced that the country has withdrawn from the 17+1 format created to enhance cooperation between China and 17 Central and Eastern European countries. The decision was followed by voting in the Lithuanian parliament Seimas which decided, out of national security concerns, to exclude "*unreliable*" suppliers from the construction of the Lithuanian 5G infrastructure⁴². Although the US efforts to prohibit Huawei from the 5G area have mixed effects on a global scale, the steps taken by Lithuania make for considerable success. The 17+1 format, in its original form, no longer exists.

The increasingly aggressive Chinese "wolf warrior diplomacy" clearly goes to the detriment of Beijing's interests and the relations between Washington and its chief European allies are on the mend, but at the same time, Berlin and Paris may still be loath to pick sides in a possibly looming US-China confrontation. Although a temporary halt on the CAI ratification process makes a considerable victory for the US and the Western unity, it may come at a cost. Almost simultaneously, the US Department of State announced that it will refrain from the imposition of certain sanctions against the Nord Stream 2 project which

³⁹ Griffiths, James. "China sanctions UK lawmakers and entities in retaliation for Xinjiang measures". *CNN*. March 26, 2021. <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/03/25/china/china-uk-sanctions-xinjiang-intl-hnk/index.html>.

⁴⁰ "G7 Foreign and Development Ministers' Meeting: Communiqué, London, 5 May 2021". *Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office*. May 5, 2021. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/g7-foreign-and-development-ministers-meeting-may-2021-communication/g7-foreign-and-development-ministers-meeting-communication-london-5-may-2021>.

⁴¹ Lau, Stuart. „European Parliament votes to 'freeze' investment deal until China lifts sanctions". *Politico*. May 20, 2021. <https://www.politico.eu/article/european-parliament-freezes-china-investment-deal-vote/>.

⁴² „Lithuania bans 'unreliable' technologies from its 5G network". *Lithuanian Radio and Television (LRT)*. May 25, 2021. <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1417429/lithuania-bans-unreliable-technologies-from-its-5g-network>.

Germany has its vested interest in⁴³. The indecisiveness of some European allies is reflected in their Indo-Pacific strategies. While both Berlin and Paris published official documents dedicated to the Indo-Pacific region, their approach toward China is rather balanced and inclusive. While they recognise the risk of China's rising power and assertiveness, they do not want to stand on the front line of the great power competition in Asia. Similarly to ASEAN and South Korea, Europe does not want cold war-like blocks to emerge as it would harm business interests in the difficult post-pandemic era. Europe is therefore likely to sit on the sidelines, engaging in some specific policy areas such as technology transfers, human rights or climate change.

The US has successfully involved its allies in maritime (and not only) shows of force which are obviously of limited importance in times of peace, yet they may show China the unity of its adversaries. The British aircraft carrier HMS Queen Elizabeth has recently been deployed to a long mission that will culminate in the Indo-Pacific region. In mid-May, the US, French, Japanese and Australian armed forces conducted first-ever joint drills on the Japanese soil. Australia declared it will spend \$580 million for four military bases in its North and joint war games with the US⁴⁴. Canberra is also going to invest \$761 million in the production of its own guided missiles⁴⁵. The most recent question is if the British carrier strike group will be able to compensate for US Navy scarcities in the Indo-Pacific in the forthcoming months as it was reported, at the end of May, that the USS Ronald Reagan, currently the sole US carrier in the region, will soon be redeployed to the Middle East to support US Army pullout from Afghanistan⁴⁶.

First actions have been undertaken in the field of technology. In early February, the US semiconductor industry sent a joint letter urging him to *"include in your recovery and infrastructure plan substantial funding for incentives for semiconductor manufacturing"*⁴⁷. The

⁴³ Blinken, Antony J. "Nord Stream 2 and European Energy Security". *The Department of State*. May 19, 2021. <https://www.state.gov/nord-stream-2-and-european-energy-security/>.

⁴⁴ Jose, Renju, Packham, Colin. "Targeting Asia-Pacific defence, Australia to spend \$580 mln on military upgrades". *Reuters*. April 28, 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/australia-upgrade-military-bases-expand-wargames-with-us-australian-2021-04-27/>.

⁴⁵ Perry, Nick. "Australia to build guided missiles to boost defense capacity". *The Associated Press*. March 31, 2021. <https://apnews.com/article/world-news-australia-scott-morrison-new-zealand-114bfafef0d4d917792e0fa1f3f148a5>.

⁴⁶ Youssef, Nancy A., Lubold, Gordon. "Sole U.S. Aircraft Carrier in Asia-Pacific to Help With Afghanistan Troop Withdrawal". *The Wall Street Journal*. May 26, 2021. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-aircraft-carrier-leaving-asia-to-help-with-afghanistan-troop-withdrawal-11622034089>.

⁴⁷ Duffy, Claire. "Chipmakers urge Biden administration to invest in US manufacturing". *CNN*. Feb. 12, 2021. <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/02/12/tech/american-semiconductor-manufacturing-biden/index.html>.

authors of the letter stressed that such moves would be essential if US companies were to win against competitors who are heavily subsidised by their governments. On February 24, Joe Biden issued an executive order to review US supply chains within 100 days, also with respect to semiconductors. The review has been conducted and on June 8, the White House announced the conclusions, as well as steps, deemed necessary to strengthen supply chains and bolster domestic production capacity of the four key elements: semiconductors, pharmaceuticals, critical minerals and large capacity batteries. A new "Supply Chain Disruptions Task Force" has been created to "address short-term supply chain discontinuities"⁴⁸.

Biden's \$2 trillion infrastructure bill proposal includes \$50 billion investment in chip manufacturing and research⁴⁹. In his virtual meeting with tech CEOs in mid-April, Biden supported tax incentives for US companies producing critical components in the light of the ongoing shortages⁵⁰. Integrated circuits are one of the crucial sectors in the world economy and the US still possesses a profound advantage over other actors. In 2020, China imported over \$300 billion worth of chips making it the top imported commodity⁵¹. Beijing's reliance on foreign supply chains plays a stabilizing role in its foreign policy, however in recent years, Chinese authorities have made visible efforts to address this issue and achieve technological "self-reliance". **To guarantee its dominance, Washington is likely to orchestrate efforts among sector leaders such as Taiwan, Japan, South Korea and European Union too keep China away from lucrative and sensitive technologies with significant political leverage.**

There is a strong bipartisan consensus in the US Congress that enhancing US competitiveness, especially in the area of new technologies, is key to competing with other nations, mainly China. For example, the Senate passed a \$250 billion USICA (US Innovation and Competition Act) bill on June 8, which aims at increasing US technological

⁴⁸ *The White House*, "FACT SHEET: Biden-Harris Administration Announces Supply Chain Disruptions Task Force To Address Short-Term Supply Chain Discontinuities | The White House". 2021.. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/06/08/fact-sheet-biden-harris-administration-announces-supply-chain-disruptions-task-force-to-address-short-term-supply-chain-discontinuities/>.

⁴⁹ "Factbox: Biden jobs plan includes \$50 bln for chips research, manufacturing". *Reuters*. April 12, 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/biden-jobs-plan-includes-50-bln-chips-research-manufacturing-2021-04-12/>.

⁵⁰ "Remarks by President Biden at a Virtual CEO Summit on Semiconductor and Supply Chain Resilience". *The White House*. April 12, 2021. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/04/12/remarks-by-president-biden-at-a-virtual-ceo-summit-on-semiconductor-and-supply-chain-resilience/>.

⁵¹ Borak, Masha. „China boosts semiconductor production in 2020, but imports keep apace, frustrating self-sufficiency goals”. *South China Morning Post*. Jan. 19, 2021. <https://www.scmp.com/tech/policy/article/3118327/china-boosts-semiconductor-production-2020-imports-keep-apace>.

competitiveness in the light of the rivalry with China. Around \$50 billion is to go to the semiconductors industry. Apart from that, research and development (R&D) in numerous agencies and areas shall be supported. The bill still faces consideration by the House of Representatives. Joe Biden has immediately issued a statement in which he praised the Senate. In his address to Congress in April 2021, the president also noted that the US is spending far too little on Research and Development (R&D)⁵².

One of the priorities of Joe Biden's team will be the conclusion of Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) with the Philippines. President Rodrigo Duterte in 2016 made an attempt to abandon the deal declaring "*separation from the United States*"⁵³. This scenario has never materialised as the Philippine Secretary of Foreign Affairs Teodoro Locsin Jr. in 2020 informed the country had suspended the announced termination of the agreement⁵⁴. Duterte's failed rapprochement with Beijing and China's rising aggressiveness in the SCS have pushed Manila to recalculate its relationship with Washington.

Biden is furthermore expected to elevate the relationship with ASEAN which suffered during Donald Trump's presidency. Among the grouping Indonesia, Singapore, Vietnam and Malaysia stand out as the key partners. Economically, ASEAN is strongly connected to China, but the majority of its members share some of the US security concerns, especially in regards to SCS. ASEAN is likely to support only the stabilizing role of the US military and increased economic engagement, but will continue to stay on the sidelines of the US-China competition. The US has recently missed the opportunity of Antony Blinken's video-conference with ASEAN foreign ministers scheduled for May 25, 2021. It did not take place due to technical problems for the part of the US, which China immediately took advantage of by organizing a similar meeting in Chongqing⁵⁵.

⁵² Basu, Zachary. 2021. "Senate Passes Sweeping China Competition Bill In Rare Bipartisan Vote". *Axios*. <https://www.axios.com/senate-china-competition-bipartisan-e2fa3f88-16d4-4d79-bab0-1b9c6a4f2774.html>.

⁵³ Ide, Bill. „Duterte Announces Philippine 'Separation' from US". *VOA News*. Oct. 20, 2021. <https://www.voanews.com/east-asia-pacific/duterte-announces-philippine-separation-us>.

⁵⁴ „Statement: On the Suspension of the Pending Termination of the PH-US Visiting Forces Agreement". *Republic of the Philippines. Department of Foreign Affairs*. June 3, 2020. <https://dfa.gov.ph/dfa-news/statements-and-advisories/update/26892-statement-on-the-suspension-of-the-pending-termination-of-the-ph-us-visiting-forces-agreement>.

⁵⁵ Strangio, Sebastian. „ASEAN and China Ministers Talk COVID-19, Myanmar Crisis". *The Diplomat*. June 8, 2021. <https://thediplomat.com/2021/06/asean-and-china-ministers-talk-covid-19-myanmar-crisis/>.

Domestic “diplomacy”

The inherent and emblematic feature of Joe Biden’s foreign policy, highlighted in the Interim National Security Strategic Guidelines is its interpenetration and inextricable connection with domestic affairs. These both spheres always condition and affect each other, to a greater or lesser extent – it was no different with Donald Trump, who blamed China for stealing US jobs and called for a return of factories to the US shores. Currently, though, this link is more clearly visible and oftentimes underscored by officials and it does already translate in deeds.

During his foreign policy speech delivered on March 3, 2021, Antony Blinken said: *“More than at any other time in my career – maybe in my lifetime – distinctions between domestic and foreign policy have simply fallen away. Our domestic renewal and our strength in the world are completely entwined. And how we work will reflect that reality”*⁵⁶. Similarly, in his inaugural address, Joe Biden mentioned US alliances only once. Instead, he preferred to focus on internal affairs and invoke American values⁵⁷.

But what best highlights the interdependence between internal and external affairs is Biden’s approach to infrastructure investments as well as his environmental agenda. In March, the President unveiled a sweeping \$2 trillion plan to overhaul the deteriorating US infrastructure which is understood broadly – not only as bridges or roads which should be fixed but also as public schools or clean energy or lead water pipes which need to be replaced⁵⁸. Biden mentions China on almost every occasion while speaking about infrastructure. He treats infrastructure as a critical element that determines US strength and translates into its external might. Additionally, China has a new and recently built infrastructure, whereas the US one was built decades ago. The infrastructure plan also includes clean energy investments such as creating a clean power grid⁵⁹, installing 500,000 EV charging stations along highways and erecting more energy-efficient buildings. These activities are to bring *“millions of good-paying*

⁵⁶ Blinken, Antony. “A Foreign Policy for the American People”. *The Department of State*. March 3, 2021. <https://www.state.gov/a-foreign-policy-for-the-american-people/>.

⁵⁷ “Inaugural Address by President Joseph R. Biden, Jr.”, *The White House*. Jan. 20, 2021. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/01/20/inaugural-address-by-president-joseph-r-biden-jr/>.

⁵⁸ Tankersley, Jim, „Biden Details \$2 Trillion Plan to Rebuild Infrastructure and Reshape the Economy”. *The New York Times*. Marc 31, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/31/business/economy/biden-infrastructure-plan.html>.

⁵⁹ „FACT SHEET: Biden Administration Advances Electric Vehicle Charging Infrastructure”. *The White House*. April 22, 2021. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/04/22/fact-sheet-biden-administration-advances-electric-vehicle-charging-infrastructure/>.

jobs”. During his presidential address to Congress, Joe Biden insisted: “*We’re in competition with China and other countries to win the 21st century*”.

Summary

After approximately 120 days of a new administration, it is safe to say that there is more continuity than significant differences when compared to the previous administration in Joe Biden’s approach to the Indo-Pacific. There is also no doubt that Biden’s first term cannot be perceived as Barack Obama’s third tenure. And this is despite the fact that a vast number of individuals have had an opportunity to serve under both presidents. Many of Biden’s successes speak for themselves (joint sanctions, temporary freezing of CAI, QUAD meetings) whereas some others bode well, but they require more time to bear fruit (partnership with Japan and South Korea, the battle over 5G and 6G).

The world has changed substantially over the past five years, which is why Joe Biden’s Asian doctrine will probably be a mixture of Obama’s and Trump’s. The Covid-19 pandemic left governments no option but to embark on a spending spree which marks a dramatic return of state interventionism. This is why Joe Biden has already proposed three packages worth around \$6 trillion. The Administration, which is learning from mistakes of Hillary Clinton, may incorporate some elements of “*America First*” to respond to social pressures. Joe Biden and his team will be slow to lift tariffs imposed on China by Donald Trump as some industrial circles consider them beneficial to their interest. Biden does not also want to make himself an easy target for Republicans and Donald Trump who extensively accused him of “*being soft on China*” during the presidential campaign. **The pressure from domestic producers and unions makes joining CPTPP and following in the footsteps of Barack Obama rather difficult for Biden. The rhetoric should be less confrontational, but the crux of the problem remains unchanged.**

Joe Biden will resort to diplomatic measures and alliances more often, but it’s highly likely the “*America First*” approach will linger, yet not directly articulated. Or – in other words – **Trump’s “shoot-from-the-hip policy” may be replaced by a more targeted approach of “small yard, high fence”.** Biden’s insistence on “*like minded partners*” and “*democratic values*” misses some of the systemic changes and is more likely a diplomatic tool. The US supremacy over Asia has significantly dwindled since China has emerged as the regional

leading economic power. Donald Trump's impact on the relations with key partners should not be therefore overestimated as the roots of the process are structural and they had preceded his tenure. Despite Biden's win, the European Union, South Korea and Philippines are still reluctant to unambiguously join the US coalition in the Indo-Pacific. The problem lies thus not necessarily in the wrong leader, but in China's growing role in the world economy and international politics. Biden's Indo-Pacific strategy, with not many options on the table, will then largely concentrate on closely cooperating with Quad countries: Japan, Australia and India.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jakub Graca. Master of International Relations at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow. He also studied Arabic therein. He was active in several student organizations, completed an internship at the Polish Embassy in Ottawa, and worked in international companies. An analyst at the Center for International Initiatives (Warsaw) and the Institute of New Europe. Research interests: United States (mainly foreign policy), transatlantic relations.



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