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WILL CHINA TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION'S INVOLVEMENT IN THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR

Vladyslav Faraponov
Internews Ukraine

Russia's full-scale war on Ukraine has drastically shifted US foreign policy priorities. China was seen to be the major rival for America in various dimensions, but now the administration is deeply involved in assisting Ukraine in order to deter Russia's war of choice. At the same time, China's possible alignment with Russia and Beijing's silence on the Russia-Ukraine war put the Biden Administration into a difficult position, which means containing both strategic rivals with the risk of direct military confrontation.

Introduction

The emerging Joe Biden foreign policy doctrine can be summarised as the fight between democracies and autocracies. Given two remaining years in office, it would be expected for the Biden administration to become more active in its Asia policy while making sure the US allies and partners are ready to assist Washington if necessary. The recently announced US approach towards China as "invest, align, compete" seems to be rather theoretical.¹ Thus, this article will examine what the US can do and what it cannot do in the region, considering this new approach.

In this article, we will summarise Biden's policy towards Asia as a whole, with a clear

focus on China, considering the AUKUS agreement and restoring cooperation with Japan and South Korea. Second, the article will explain how the potential China-Russia coalition will impact US foreign policy interests. Third, we would suggest how the Biden administration's policy may look towards China, specifically in the context of the China-Russia declaration (February 2022).² The piece will also touch upon an explanation of the stakes for Washington if China escalates the situation with Taiwan.

The Joe Biden Administration has been unofficially following the same approach towards China, set by the Donald Trump Administration (2017-2021). The United States, in its National Security Strategy under Trump's tenure, acknowledged China

1 Antony J. Blinken, *The Administration's Approach to the People's Republic of China*, Speech of Secretary of State, the George Washington University, Washington D.C., May 2022
[<https://www.state.gov/the-administrations-approach-to-the-peoples-republic-of-china/>]

2 *Xi and Putin urge Nato to rule out expansion as Ukraine tensions rise*, "Guardian", 04 February 2022
[<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/04/xi-jinping-meets-vladimir-putin-china-russia-tensions-grow-west>]

as a strategic competitor.³ That is the current strategy, not to mention the Interim Strategy presented by Joe Biden in March 2021.⁴

Three months after Russia launched its full-scale war on Ukraine, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken reaffirmed that the US views China as the most serious long-term challenge to the international order. Besides, he recognised that only China had both the desire to reshape the existing world order and enough diplomatic, military, economic, and technological power to do so.⁵ Taking into account the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Biden's team had to postpone the release of its coherent national security strategy, but also to rewrite it in a way that reflects the agenda and challenges that are posed by Moscow, not just Beijing.⁶ At the same time, the Biden Administration went far beyond uniting its allies in the Indo-Pacific, and even managed to proceed with new strategic agreements.

US Does Not Shift Its Approach towards China, but Strengthens Ties with Partners

By creating, in mid-September 2021, the AUKUS Alliance, which stands for first letters of its members, Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, the US secured a new high-level partnership to counter China's growing influence in the Indo-Pacific.⁷ The

AUKUS agreement means not only building nuclear-powered submarines for Australia, but the deep mutual integration of security and defence-related science, technology, industrial bases, and supply chains.⁸ This is definitely the most alarming point in the deal for China, and one of the most beneficial for the United States.

The long-awaited US pivot to Asia, first announced by Barack Obama, has been continuing under the 46th President's term, despite being not named as such. The Biden Administration has tried to make sure it has enough resources and attention for all the regions, and will not officially recognise that one particular region is more important to them. In that regard, the current US strategy could be perceived as creating new small alliances and ensuring the stability and coherence of the existing ones.

First, in addition to AUKUS, and QUAD, now the US has initiated the creation of the new coordination group, which is called the Partners in the Blue Pacific (PBP). It includes Japan, New Zealand, Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom. The initiative resulted in the allocation of USD 2.1 billion as combined assistance to the region, and closer diplomatic and economic ties between its members. Thus, it is too early to describe this newly established group as having real impact, but it is an additional way for

3 *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, The White House, December 2017 [https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf]

4 *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance*, The White House, March 2021 [https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf]

5 A. J. Blinken, *The Administration's Approach to the People's Republic of China*, #2

6 J. Gould, *White House aims to release overdue security strategies within weeks*, "Defense News", 01 August 2022 [https://www.defensenews.com/pentagon/2022/08/01/white-house-aims-to-release-overdue-security-strategies-within-weeks/]

7 S. Erlanger, *The Sharp U.S. Pivot to Asia Is Throwing Europe Off Balance*, "The New York Times", 17 September 2021 [https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/17/world/europe/biden-china-europe-submarine-deal.html?action=click&module=RelatedLinks&pgtype=Article]

8 *Joint Leaders Statement on AUKUS*, The White House, 15 September 2021 [https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/09/15/joint-leaders-statement-on-aukus/]

America to deepen cooperation and maintain high-level confidence in each of the nations.⁹ Second, given the fact that Kurt Campbell, the incumbent White House Coordinator for the Indo-Pacific, argues that the current China-US competition lies in the realms of economy and technology, and American success in it requires reinvestments so as to compete properly, it is fair to assume that the US finds the region one of the key priorities in its foreign policy as a whole.¹⁰



The current American strategy in Asia may be summed up as learning from China's mistakes and moving forward with additional small alliances, to make sure the region does not fall into Beijing's hands

Third, it is possible that Washington will continue to compete in attempts to gain influence over Kiribati, which left the Pacific Islands Forum in a possible pro-Beijing move in July 2022¹¹. It is notable that Kiribati is less than 2,000 miles from the US state of Hawaii, where the United States Indo-Pacific Command is located.¹² It is another indicator that both China and the US are raising the

stakes in the region, and continue to create more and more persuasive coalitions.

Fourth, the QUAD group, consisting of India, Japan, and Australia, alongside the US, remains an important alliance for Washington, as it includes India. At the same time, India has purchased even more energy supplies from Russia since Moscow invaded Ukraine. Besides, India is still buying its military hardware from Russia.¹³ In addition, India's imports from Russia in the first half of 2022 added up to at least USD 8.3 billion, almost three times more than for the same period in 2021¹⁴. In that regard, QUAD may be seen as a very limited pact for Washington, which may not survive long if one of its members has completely the opposite approach towards one of the world's most unpredictable crises. The American establishment will face a hard choice: to continue engaging in that format or to reshape other forms of cooperation with those countries if India does not change its approach to the Ukraine-Russia war.

The current American strategy in Asia may be summed up as learning from China's mistakes and moving forward with additional small alliances, to make sure the region does not fall into Beijing's hands, both in terms of the economy and military expansion.

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- 9 *Statement by Australia, Japan, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States on the Establishment of the Partners in the Blue Pacific (PBP)*, the White House, 24 June 2022 [<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/06/24/statement-by-australia-japan-new-zealand-the-united-kingdom-and-the-united-states-on-the-establishment-of-the-partners-in-the-blue-pacific-pbp/>]
 - 10 K. Campbell, *The China Challenge Can Help America Avert Decline*, "Foreign Affairs", 03 December 2020 [<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2020-12-03/china-challenge-can-help-america-avert-decline>]
 - 11 *Kiribati's Shock Withdrawal Overshadows Pacific Leaders Meeting in Fiji*, "VOA", 11 July, 2022 [<https://www.voanews.com/a/kiribati-s-shock-withdrawal-overshadows-pacific-leaders-meeting-in-fiji/6653385.html>].
 - 12 S.Tiwari, *China's Military Base Near USA: As Beijing Extends Its Reach To Kiribati Islands, Hawaii's Missile Defense Remains A Pipe-Dream*, "The EurAsian Times", 27 May 2022 [<https://eurasianimes.com/chinas-military-base-near-usa-beijing-extends-its-reach-to-kiribati-islands/>]
 - 13 *Joe Biden: invasion of Ukraine shows need for free and open Indo-Pacific*, "The Guardian", 24 May 2022 [<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/may/24/russias-invasion-of-ukraine-underlines-need-for-free-and-open-indo-pacific-biden-says>]
 - 14 N. Masih, *India turns to Russian fertilizer, showing challenge of isolating Moscow*, "Washington Post", 04 August 2022 [<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/08/04/india-russia-fertilizer-oil-imports/>]

The US views China as a revisionist state in terms of its desire to break or reshape the US-led world order. In that regard, America is doing its best to make sure its allies and partners in the region support its initiatives. At the same time, some analysts argue that Beijing's failure to translate economic might into political dominance is too obvious for the United States.¹⁵ That is why Biden's team rushed to establish the new coordination format to ensure better connected economic ties with the Indo-Pacific, namely Thailand, Vietnam, Australia, Brunei, India, Indonesia, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Malaysia, New Zealand, the Philippines, and Singapore. Notably, the aspects of cooperation include cross-border data flow and data localisation, and application of the artificial intelligence and clean energy, anti-money laundering, and anti-bribery regimes, a clear hint on China's influence and the way Beijing approaches business globally¹⁶.

China's Half-Hearted Approach to the Russia-Ukraine War Leaves Washington in the Dark

From a realistic perspective, it is in the strategic interests of the US that China does not form any sort of alliance with Russia during or after the Russia-Ukraine war. At the same time, China views Russia as a partner in its strategic competition with the United States. In that context, the war is only a trigger to demonstrate that situation.

In addition, right before Russia launched its unprovoked, unjustified war on Ukraine, during the Winter Olympics of 2022, the

Chinese and Russian leaders explicitly agreed to deepen their cooperation, claiming the bonds between the two countries had no limits, as there are no areas forbidden to cooperation.¹⁷ Such an announcement certainly came as a surprise to Ukraine, and even the fact that the Chinese leader Xi Jinping hosted Russia's President Vladimir Putin was intended to send a signal to the world that China is strategically binding with Russia, and that their cooperation would only be strengthened.



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At the same time, China's strategy over the full-scale Ukraine-Russia war, which lacks public condemnation of the invasion or even acknowledgment of Russia's so-called "special military operation" as a full-scale war, will not last forever. It is very likely that US and EU anti-Russian sanctions will make China declare its position sooner rather than later. It seems particularly relevant in terms of helping Russia evade sanctions technically. In the worst-case scenario both for Washington and Ukraine, China will provide military assistance to Russia and help it finance the war.

15 M. Schuman, *China Is Doing Biden's Work for Him*, "The Atlantic", 24 May 2022

[<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2022/05/joe-biden-asia-quad-china/630172/>]

16 *Fact Sheet: In Asia, President Biden and a Dozen Indo-Pacific Partners Launch the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity*, White House, 23 May 2022

[<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/05/23/fact-sheet-in-asia-president-biden-and-a-dozen-indo-pacific-partners-launch-the-indo-pacific-economic-framework-for-prosperity/>]

17 A. Roth, V. Ni, Xi and Putin urge Nato to rule out expansion as Ukraine tensions rise, "The Guardian", 4 February 2022

[<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/04/xi-jinping-meets-vladimir-putin-china-russia-tensions-grow-west>]

Nevertheless, China's major interest in the war as of mid-2022 is to observe the amount of US assistance to Ukraine, the Administration's involvement, its interaction with Congress, the willingness of the US lawmakers to help, and the way NATO members support Ukraine. For China, this is a test at a distance, and the opportunity to study various scenarios if it decides to invade Taiwan. The test applies to factors such as Western unity, and NATO's resilience.



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At the same time, China is also cautious in its ambitions to take control over Taiwan, not only because the US has special relations with Taipei, but also fearing the severity of Western sanctions and the cutting of economic ties, which provide a great part of China's influence in the world. However, as TIME magazine pointed out, if Western sanctions against Putin's inner circle, Russia's economy and the oligarchs fail, China would note the US decline as a superpower.¹⁸ For Ukraine, it means that the US Administration would not be forced to give more attention to applying new sanctions, but to make sure that those already imposed have a real impact and do not allow Russia to easily avoid their impact, with China's help.

Besides, China would like to see the US and Europe get tired of the Ukraine-Russia war and exhaust their resources, including military assistance.¹⁹ Russia's full-fledged invasion reveals essential information for China about which particular military equipment the Western countries possess, and what they can provide to Ukraine. They watch not only which ammunition and arms Ukraine's partners hold back or even refuse to deliver but also their rhetoric, and explore their willingness to help.

Taiwan Remains a Major Point for a Clash between the Two Superpowers

Chinese public reassurance of their readiness to hit the plane of the US House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi in August 2022, should have made the United States realise that China was ready for a rapid escalation in hostilities. This is a major shift when it comes to the Chinese side in public discourse over the last few years. Such rhetoric as a precursor to turning another but more hostile page in Washington-Beijing relations came at a bad time for Joe Biden both in terms of domestic approval rate and the upcoming midterm elections, where the Democrats could potentially lose their majority in both chambers of the US Congress, and the timeline with regard to extensive US financial and military support to Ukraine.

The Joe Biden Administration has allocated almost USD 10 billion as security assistance since the beginning of this administration at the time of writing this paper. In addition, according to the most recent

18 Ch. Campbell, *China's Embrace of Putin Is Looking More and More Costly*, "TIME", 01 April 2022 [<https://time.com/6163807/china-russia-putin-ukraine/>]

19 B. Lin, J. Blanchette, *China on the Offensive*, "Foreign Affairs", 01 September 2022 [<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/china-offensive>]

Gallup Poll, the 46th American President has the lowest approval rate for an elected president since the middle of the 20th century.^{20,21} Combining those two factors for Biden, and possibly the upcoming game-changing 2022 midterm elections, hinting at Republican control at least over the House of Representatives and potentially the Senate too²², would constitute one of the worst-case scenarios for the Democratic Administration, especially if China invades Taiwan right at that time. The situation where one party controls the White House and another has a majority in Congress is called a divided government in America, and it is a rare occurrence for any administration. It mainly diminishes the president's authority as his/her initiatives in the foreign policy sphere are not necessarily backed by political opponents. Such a situation may directly impact the allocation of foreign aid. It may lead not only to slowing it down, but also to significantly decreasing the amount.

The US has provided Ukraine with unprecedented amounts of aid as per one country during one fiscal year. According to the US Congressional Research Service, in total, the United States 2022 fiscal year appropriations include USD 12.55 billion as security assistance provided through the US Department of Defense (DoD) via presidential drawdown authority, USD 6.3 billion for DOD's Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative; and USD 4.65 billion in Foreign Military Financing (FMF) for Ukraine.²³ Moreover, Washington has not

only allocated a significant amount of aid, but has done its best to amend the assigned assistance to cater for Ukraine's needs as the war changed its course. In addition, the United States led the efforts of the newly created Ukraine Defence Contact Group, which brings together more than 40 nations worldwide to coordinate efforts and allocate aid. Thus, such comprehensive involvement has required a lot of attention and coordination from the highest officials within the administration.

In May, 2022, during the US Senate hearing, the director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, Lt. Gen. Scott D. Berrier, claimed that Taiwanese officials were learning lessons from the Ukraine war, noting the significance of effective training with the right weapons systems; perhaps hinting at the US-sold arms systems.²⁴ The United States legislation, namely, the Taiwan Relations Act, requires the United States to provide Taiwan with weapons. The law states it as the provision of arms of a defensive character to maintain the capacity of the United States to resist any resort to force or other forms of coercion that would jeopardise the security, or social or economic system, of the people of Taiwan. This act also declares that in furtherance of the principle of maintaining peace and stability in the Western Pacific area, the United States will make available to Taiwan such defence articles and defence services in such quantity as may be necessary to enable Taiwan to maintain a sufficient self-defence capacity, as determined by the US President

20 \$1 Billion in New U.S. Military Assistance for Ukraine, US Embassy in Ukraine, 08 August 2022 [https://ua.usembassy.gov/1-billion-in-new-u-s-military-assistance-for-ukraine/]

21 J. Jones, *Biden Job Approval Dips to New Low*, "Gallup", 29 July 2022 [https://news.gallup.com/poll/395378/biden-job-approval-dips-new-low.aspx]

22 *Republicans are favored to win the House*, "FiveThirtyEight", 02 August 2022 [https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/2022-election-forecast/house/]

23 *U.S. Security Assistance to Ukraine*, "Congressional Research Service", 02 August 2022, [https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF12040]

24 E. Wong, A. Qin, *U.S. Presses Taiwan to Buy Weapons More Suited to Win Against China*, "The New York Times", 07 May, 2022 [https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/07/us/politics/china-taiwan-weapons.html]

and the Congress.²⁵ Some US lawmakers even suggested the stockpiling of large amounts of munitions in Taiwan. ²⁶

President Biden made it clear that he would follow the legislative path and would provide Taiwan with the necessary weapons, and he even promised to defend Taiwan, stressing that America would go much further in defending Taiwan than its help for Ukraine to deter Russia's full-scale war.²⁷ Such a statement raised different interpretations and analogies with the Russia-Ukraine war and US commitment. In particular, it implies the United States might deploy troops to train the military of Taiwan, not to mention possible military intervention on Taiwan's side.²⁸



Taiwanese officials are not only watching the Russia-Ukraine war but take it as an example of US assistance, and they are assessing how substantial it could be. Thus, they might ask for similar types and comparable amounts of weapons to defend the island

Notably, this posed the following question from Ukraine's perspective: if the US had had similar legislation regarding Ukraine, would the US response to Russia's aggression back in 2014 have been different, or even that of early 2022? Despite that, such a persuasive statement from Biden means renouncing the so-called strategic ambiguity of his

predecessors, who maintained the status quo and preserved the One China Policy.

The Biden Administration will likely face another challenge over compressions regarding the policy on Taiwan and Ukraine. Kyiv officials may ask to increase US involvement, possibly obtaining assistance and facilitating more training for Ukraine's armed forces. Taiwanese officials are not only watching the Russia-Ukraine war but take it as an example of US assistance, and they are assessing how substantial it could be. Thus, they might ask for similar types and comparable amounts of weapons to defend the island.

In the near future, China's relations vis-à-vis the United States will most likely remain dependent on the situation over Taiwan and the American response when/if China decides to escalate. At the same time, the United States will have to decide whether to split its focus, including when providing military aid to Ukraine and Taiwan. There is a significant difference in that regard. Taiwan, like Japan, South Korea, and another 16 nations, are designated as US major non-NATO allies. It means increased cooperation, intelligence exchange, and training facilities. Ukraine does not have such a status and it is feasible that US lawmakers may refer to these obligations more often in the future if the Russia-Ukraine war is longstanding. A few, like India or Japan, have also signed security treaties with America, which in some cases require the administration to provide critical security assistance to countries if those are under attack.

25 *Taiwan Relations Act*, H.R.2479, 96th Congress (1979-1980), [<https://www.congress.gov/bill/96th-congress/house-bill/2479>]

26 E. Wong, A. Qin, #20

27 Biden Pledges to Defend Taiwan if It Faces a Chinese Attack, "The New York Times", 24 May, 2022 [<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/23/world/asia/biden-taiwan-china.html>]

28 I. Kanopathy, *Taiwan Doesn't Need a Formal U.S. Security Guarantee*, "Foreign Policy", 26 April 2022 [<https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/04/26/taiwan-us-security-guarantee-defense-china-ukraine-war/>]

Conclusions

The United States, under any administration, will continue to compete with China in various fields, such as the economy, military, and technology, in terms of world dominance. The key to winning this competition lies in Asia. At the same time, Putin's war of choice in Ukraine has raised the stakes globally and made many countries decide which side they are on, including China. The US Administration seems to be ready for various scenarios when it comes to policy. But its resources are limited, and that is going to make a difference when it comes

to US involvement worldwide, including its assistance to Ukraine, even during the full-scale war against Russia.

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