



Continuity and Change in Joe Biden's Indo-Pacific Strategy

Brynn Hansen

The Indo-Pacific: What's the Strategy vis-à-vis China?

Professor Jaffrelot

May 8, 2022

INTRODUCTION

The timing of Biden’s “Indo-Pacific strategy,” officially published on February 11, 2022, is revealing. In the weeks leading up to the war in Ukraine, as Putin mounted aggression along the border, U.S. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken was not in Moscow, but in Melbourne.¹ The fact that the highest-ranking diplomat in the United States had his attention set on Quad meetings with his counterparts from India, Japan, and Australia, during this period of international crisis emphasizes the centrality of the Indo-Pacific in the Biden administration’s agenda. With the United States’ reinvigorated interest in the Indo-Pacific in mind, it is essential to understand what Joe Biden’s new Indo-Pacific strategy is, and how its content will direct the policies of the current administration.

To answer these questions, this paper will consist of three parts. In part I, the continuities of Biden’s strategy from previous administrations will be analyzed. It will be seen that the 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategy adopts the ethos of the Obama administration, particularly in its emphasis on regional allies. It will also be noted that both Biden and Trump explicitly frame China at the center of U.S. interests. Part II will extend this comparative approach in order to highlight where the Indo-Pacific Strategy breaks from the trends of the previous two administrations: firstly, it is contextualized in our particular political moment – calling attention to COVID-19 recovery and the impacts of climate change. Secondly, and perhaps most notably, it attempts to redirect the course selected by Donald Trump on matters of regional alliances and economic cooperation. Finally, part III will highlight the potential challenges that Biden will face in the implementation of his policy in two different dimensions: this section will examine how bipartisan politics in the United States may limit

¹ “Secretary Anthony J. Blinken Remarks to the Press En Route Melbourne, Australia,” 2022.

elements of the strategy, particularly those concerning its economic framework. It will also demonstrate potential points of contention between allies.

It will be argued that Biden's officially-published Indo-Pacific strategy largely falls within the status quo of U.S. foreign policy, with a few noteworthy exceptions. Biden's emphasis on alliances, regional ties, and the expansion of the Indo-Pacific distances his approach from Trump's and roots its ethos within a framework of cooperation. This decision ultimately gives the United States a signal that the United States is reemerging as a predictable, reliant ally in the region. This rhetoric is complicated by the realities of the domestic and international political spheres, which both make implementing Biden's strategy difficult.

PART I: Continuity in U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy

a. 'Pivoting' back to the Indo-Pacific

The opening text of Biden's strategy document calls attention to the common principles unifying previous administrations' interests in the Indo-Pacific region: "The Obama administration," it reads, "significantly accelerated American prioritization of Asia, investing new diplomatic, economic, and military resources there. And the Trump administration also recognized the Indo-Pacific as the world's center of gravity."² These allusions to former presidents early in the text contextualize Biden's strategy as a continuation of the United States' wider goals in the region. This is particularly true when comparing strategies seen during the Biden and Obama administrations.

In many ways, the 2022 strategy signals the United States' intention to maintain the principles laid out in Obama's "pivot" to Asia.³ The specificities of these policy goals were outlined by Hillary Clinton – then-Secretary of State – when she published "America's

² Biden, "Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States," 4.

³ Lieberthal, 2011.

Pacific Century” in a 2011 issue of *Foreign Policy*. The goals outlined in the essay are reminiscent of those highlighted a decade and two administrations later, in 2022. Clinton noted, “One of the most important tasks of American statecraft over the next decade will [...] be to lock in a substantially increased investment – diplomatic, economic, strategic, and otherwise – in the Asia-Pacific region.”⁴ There were six key features of this “pivot” strategy – strengthening bilateral security partnerships; strengthening relationships with regional powers; engagement with multilateral organizations and institutions; expanding economic ties through increased trade and investment; expanding military presence; and upholding human rights and democratic values. These elements of the pivot strategy bear a striking resemblance to the goals of the 2022 strategy, which includes the following agenda:

- (1) Advancing the free and open Indo-Pacific to ensure that governments can make “political choices free from coercion.”⁵
- (2) “Build[ing] connections within and beyond the region” by strengthening relationships with allies and partners.⁶
- (3) Creating an “innovative new framework” to drive Indo-Pacific prosperity.⁷
- (4) Bolstering traditional security measures.⁸
- (5) Improving resilience to threats that are unique to the 21st century like COVID-19 and climate change.⁹

The similarities between these two approaches are not altogether surprising given the famously active role that Joe Biden played in the Obama administration and the way it

⁴ Clinton, 2011.

⁵ Biden, “Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States,” 8.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 14.

directed foreign policy. The return to this familiar path in United States Indo-Pacific policy could therefore be seen as Biden's means of picking up where he left off.

b. Continuing Trump's Competition with China

That is not to say that Biden's strategy is a complete return to the standards of the Obama administration; Trump's stamp remains in some elements of the document. On a purely superficial level, the use of the phrase "Indo-Pacific" is itself a handover from the Trump years, when the President changed the name of the U.S. Pacific Command to its current title – the U.S. *Indo-Pacific* Command.¹⁰ On a more substantive level, both the strategies from the Biden and Trump administrations frame China as a top priority. In recently declassified strategy documents detailing Trump's strategic framework for the Indo-Pacific, China's influence is listed as the first national security challenge facing the United States and the region. This document, the confidential accompaniment to the publically available "Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy" publication, states: "[A national security challenge is] preventing China from establishing new, illiberal spheres of influence."¹¹ The official and complete publication on the strategy by the Trump administration states that the "PRC practices repression at home and abroad," and that Beijing's control over the media, suppression of civil society, and mistreatment of ethnic minorities "undermine the conditions that have promoted stability and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific for decades."¹²

Biden, likewise, makes it clear that China is a priority for the administration from the onset. This outlook informs much of the strategy; Biden's text goes so far as to state that the United States' intensified interest in the Indo-Pacific is due to the region's "mounting challenges, particularly from the PRC."¹³ Biden's strategy also notes that aggression from the

¹⁰ PTI, 2018.

¹¹ Trump, "U.S. Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific – Declassified."

¹² Trump, "A Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision," 21.

¹³ Biden, "Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States," 5.

PRC is “most acute in the Indo-Pacific” and that “collective efforts over the next decade will determine whether the PRC succeeds in transforming the rules and norms that have benefitted the Indo-Pacific and the world.”¹⁴ It is clear that the Biden strategy does not mince words when it comes to its characterization of China as a “bullying” force in the region that represents a considerable threat towards its neighbors and to the United States’ allies in the region.¹⁵ While military security is far from the only concern highlighted in the Indo-Pacific Strategy, the document is not coy when it comes to the intention of deterring aggression and mounting military resistance to incursions in the South China Sea.¹⁶ Indeed, this directness can be seen as a through line across the three presidencies considered in this analysis.

PART II: Where Does the Strategy Differ?

To outline what Joe Biden’s Indo-Pacific strategy is, it is helpful to specify what it is not. Biden’s strategy marks a departure from Trump’s in two distinct ways: first and foremost, Biden’s strategy places a much greater emphasis on ties with regional allies and partners. Secondly, it outlines plans for a specific “Indo-Pacific Economic Framework” that is designed to implement trade, labor, and environmental standards.¹⁷

a. Regional Allies

One of the primary shifts in Biden’s strategy is its placement within the framework of current affairs. Calls for cooperation and regional partnerships are not just fueled by realist views of security, but by larger concerns brought to the fore by COVID-19 and climate change. It is with these threats in mind that the 2022 text states: “We will cooperate with our allies and partners while seeking to work with the PRC in areas like climate change and nonproliferation.”¹⁸ The inclusion of China in this cooperative effort is explained by the

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Biden, “Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States,” 5.

¹⁶ Ibid., 6.

¹⁷ Ibid., 11.

¹⁸ Ibid., 5.

following sentence, “We believe it is in the interests of the region and the wider world that no country goes without progress on existential transnational issues because of bilateral differences.”¹⁹ With such sentiments embedded in the text, it is clear that, while China is framed as a threat to U.S. interests, the Biden administration is attempting to turn away from the confrontational approach that characterized Trump’s diplomacy. Highlighting the United States’ willingness to engage with China is not just an attempt at virtue signaling. The decision to include this language in the strategy document shows Indo-Pacific countries (particularly those that are reliant on China as an economic partner) that they no longer have to unequivocally align themselves with China or the United States. The path taken by the Trump administration – one that pitted countries as being either with China or against it – limited the United States’ potential to develop economic frameworks. This shift in attitude will be welcome for countries in South East Asia and elsewhere in the region that are caught in the middle of the path.

In many ways, this text, and excerpts like those included above, are an attempt to distance the Biden administration from the America-First philosophy that harmed the United States’ economic and political standing in international circles. The rhetoric in Biden’s outline places management before conflict; a strategy it hopes to achieve through closer ties with its allies. Ryan Hass, the former director for the China desk of the U.S. National Security Council noted that Biden plans implement “an Asia strategy for dealing with China, rather than a China strategy for Asia.”²⁰ This characterization can be neatly applied to Biden’s new Indo-Pacific Strategy document, which states, “Our objective is not to change the PRC but to shape the strategic environment in which it operates.”²¹ Changing the strategic

¹⁹ Ibid., 5.

²⁰ Hass, 2011.

²¹ Biden, “Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States,” 5.

environment, in this case, refers to reinforcing ties with allies in order to counterbalance Chinese political and economic influence.

While the Indo-Pacific policy documents from the Trump administration do note the role that allies play in Indo-Pacific strategy, these partnerships took a secondary role in his strategy texts. The mention of allies in the Trump document is limited to talk of “shared visions” that can help to execute U.S. policy aims in the region.²² The declassified document released by the Trump administration implies that alliances within the strategy serve traditional security functions and that the advancement of “U.S. security leadership” is the primary objective of these relationships.²³ As such, a smaller set of allies and strategic partners – namely, Australia, India, and Japan – are placed front and center. The 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategy sees a divergence from these standards. In its introduction, the strategy notes a departure from previous conceptions of the region and U.S. partners within it:

“The United States and much of the world have viewed Asia too narrowly. [...] We will focus on every corner of the region, from Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia, to South Asia and Oceania, including the Pacific Islands.”²⁴

Such descriptions clearly show Biden’s desire to counterbalance Beijing, even when China is not explicitly written on the page. References to ASEAN, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, and the European Union demonstrate the administration’s desire to broaden the lens of the Indo-Pacific.

Biden’s strategy expands this network even further by highlighting Europe’s role in the Indo-Pacific; expressing shared agendas of the United States and European allies on matters from economic interests to maritime security. Garima Mohan of the German Marshall Fund notes that Biden’s strategy “builds on the engagement of previous U.S. administrations

²² Trump, “A Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision,” 21.

²³ Trump, “U.S. Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific – Declassified.”

²⁴ Biden, “Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States,” 5.

with Asia and reflects a broad bipartisan consensus on the importance of the Indo-Pacific.”²⁵ While Mohan attests to the fact that much of the document is familiar, she notes that within the new strategy there is a “clear articulation of how the United States wants to work with partners outside of the region, particularly Europe.”²⁶ The United States’ intention to “build a bridge between the Indo-Pacific region and the Euro-Atlantic region” illustrates this interest in coordinating rich international partnerships.²⁷ The enthusiasm with which alliances are championed in the document was not as clear in previous administrations’ approaches to the Indo-Pacific.²⁸ This emphasis on alliances, while undoubtedly motivated by strategic needs in the region, could also be explained by a desire to signal a business-as-usual approach to U.S. foreign policy. Placing allies at the center of the document is Biden’s answer to balancing jingoistic attitudes that defined U.S. foreign policy from 2016 onwards.

b. Filling in the Hole Left by the TPP

Biden’s effort to secure economic leadership in the region is a direct response to the foreign policy decisions of the Trump administration. American attempts to turn inwards and pursue an America-first economic strategy were made clear on Trump’s first day in office, when he withdrew the United States from negotiations in the Trans-Pacific Partnership.²⁹ These negotiations, which had been at the forefront of the Pivot plan’s economic interests, and were championed by Biden during his time as Vice President, have been replaced by this strategy’s Indo-Pacific economic framework. With the United States’ entry into the TPP undercut by congressional malaise at home, economic priorities are instead engrained in the new strategy. The previously mentioned Indo-Pacific Economic Framework proposed in Biden’s new strategy is an attempt to minimize Trump’s influence on U.S. foreign policy and

²⁵ Mohan, 2022.

²⁶ Biden, “Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States,” 5.

²⁷ Ibid., 10.

²⁸ Freeman, Markey, Singh, 2022.

²⁹ “The United States Officially Withdraws from the Trans-Pacific Partnership,” 2018.

nudge back towards the path set in 2011. The Framework’s aim of “doubling down on [U.S.] economic ties to the region while contributing to broadly shared Indo-Pacific opportunity,” is thus an answer to increased trade and investment outside the architecture of the TPP.³⁰

PART III: Challenges in Implementation

a. Domestic Challenges

The goals listed in this U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy document are in place to leverage the growth of the PCR’s Belt and Road Initiative. The document intends to use the framework of the Quad as a tool for resistance; Biden highlights that these core allies will help to secure cooperation on matters of public health, energy transitions, and infrastructure development. This element of the strategy, and the funds that must be earmarked in order to ensure that it is realized, represent a significant challenge for a U.S. president without bipartisan support. Part one of the strategy’s ten-step action plan states that the administration will “ensure that our policy and resourcing have the bipartisan backing necessary to support our strong and steady regional goals.”³¹ This assurance of consensus within Congress is overly rosy, particularly considering that Biden’s Build Back Better Plan, the flagship policy of his presidency with an express focus on domestic affairs, did not muster the votes needed to pass the U.S. Senate.³² With cost framed as the most contentious issue at the heart of Biden’s domestic infrastructure policy, drumming support for foreign infrastructure work will be a difficult sell.³³

Without the funds in place to mobilize infrastructure projects in the Indo-Pacific, U.S. leadership on this front is unlikely to make significant strides. In this vacuum, Indo-Pacific

³⁰ Biden, “Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States,” 15.

³¹ Biden, “Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States,” 15.

³² “H.R. 5376 – 117th Congress (2021 – 2022): Build Back Better Act,” 2021.

³³ Seipel, Arnie, Hernandez, 2021.

states without enough resources to meet infrastructure demands may turn towards the Belt and Road Initiative in its absence.

b. Begrudging Allies?

Obama's vision for the Indo-Pacific took the backburner when the conflict in Syria became the primary foreign policy interest for the United States at the time. While Obama's TPP negotiations were no doubt an answer to Indo-Pacific policy, the fact that the partnership was sidestepped by the Trump administration meant that the Republican president was able to leave a more distinctive stamp on United States foreign policy in the region. Questions about Biden's ability to realize his Indo-Pacific strategy loom large in 2022 as they did during Obama's eight years in office. Just as the war in Syria directed the Obama administration's attention away from the Indo-Pacific in 2011, so too does the war in Ukraine have the potential to undercut the Strategy's goals.

The emphasis on strengthening partnerships – particularly with India – brings these concerns into sharper focus. The strategy document specifically sites “India's continued rise and regional leadership” to be one of the most vital means of success in the region. As a member of the Quad, India is recognized as a security force that can provide strategic protection to countries in the Indian Ocean. Its contentious relationship with China makes it an even more robust, influential partner for the United States, which sees it as a natural buffer against Chinese influence in the region. However, reconciling the desire for regional partners with the strategy's ideological goals of democratization and the dissemination of internationally-accepted conceptions of human rights could pose an issue.

Biden's emphasis on working with open societies and promoting democratic institutions sees some discomfort when attention is turned to India; economic, democratic, and human rights principles exercised under the Modi government are in direct opposition to the values that the United States intends to instill with its strategy. Protectionist policies and

cronyism in India's key economic sectors do not align with images of the free and open Indo-Pacific envisioned in the strategy document. What is more, the current Indian government is unlikely to be wooed by the free-and-open model that the United States intends to lay out for regional allies who engage with U.S. strategy. As the Biden years continue and the administration moves to implement its ten-step rollout of the Indo-Pacific Strategy, illiberalism in India may test commitments to these causes. Priorities of the strategy may shine through if the United States chooses counterbalancing China over promoting democratic norms. The true test of this comes with the war in Ukraine, which has put India on shaky grounds in regard to its relationships with Russia and the United States. India's reliance on Russia for weaponry and other military equipment has made the country hesitant to cut ties with Putin. This crossroads was drawn early in the invasion when, weeks after Modi expressed "serious concern about the ongoing conflict and humanitarian crisis in Ukraine" in a joint statement with Kishida Fumio, India provided a complete diplomatic welcome to a Russian Foreign Minister.³⁴³⁵

Tensions between China and Australia have been on the rise since Australia entered into the AUKUS deal, a security agreement between the United States and the United Kingdom that provides Australia with nuclear-powered submarines. Animosity is not just reserved for Australian and Chinese officials, however. France was notably embittered by this decision, which undercut the country's own \$37 billion deal with a diesel submarine producer, and denied the traditional Western ally a seat at the negotiation table.³⁶ Of course, just one week after the incident – which had prompted France to recall its ambassador in Washington – Macron and Biden were on the phone to negotiate a way forward.³⁷ Put in

³⁴ Biswas, 2022.

³⁵ Zeeshan, 2022.

³⁶ "Aukus Pact: France and U.S. Seek to Mend Rift," 2021.

³⁷ Ibid., 2021.

other terms, the relationship between the United States and France will not see substantive changes as a result of this decision, but the levels of trust between these two countries is not where it once was. These traditionally strong allies will continue to move in the same foreign policy circles, but it would be remiss to assume that this deal will be easily forgotten. Such an issue highlights some of the challenges that could plague Biden as he attempts to build alliances going forward.

CONCLUSION

This paper served to break down Joe Biden's recently published Indo-Pacific Strategy from three dimensions. By examining the similarities and differences to his predecessor's strategic proposals, Joe Biden's framework was nestled into a familiar model. This approach provided an opportunity to assess the document's priorities and potential challenges. In part I of the paper, it was noted that Biden strategy of 2022 is largely in keeping with the standards established in previous administrations. The resemblance to Obama's strategy comes as no surprise to those aware of the role that Biden played in shaping major policy decisions during his time as the Vice President. What is more notable in this case, are the approaches taken Biden and Trump approaches to the Indo-Pacific on paper. The similarities between these two methods can be seen most clearly through the identification of China as a threat to United States interests.

Part II, which assessed differences in Biden's approach to the Indo-Pacific took note of the policy's emphasis on regional ties and the administration's desire to develop a cohesive economic framework. While Biden's strategy sees China as a regional threat, it does not intend to enforce strong competition and direct aggression with the PRC. Instead, it suggests operating through a cooperative and geographically diverse framework within the Indo-Pacific. Such an approach, it can be argued, ensures that countries that rely on China as an economic partner are not backed into a corner and forced to forgo an ally in the United

States. Divergences from the Trump approach to the region are also seen through Biden's proposed economic framework, which fills gaps left in the TTP's absence.

The challenges facing Biden in his attempt to implement his strategy were explored in part III of this paper. The most pressing concerns stemmed from a lack of domestic support behind the President's agenda and strain on relationships with allies. The impact of the war in Ukraine on the action plan's rollout cannot be understated; this is particularly the case given that India's response to the crisis lies in diametric opposition to the ideological goals established within the strategic plan. India's value as a regional ally may wane if ties to Putin are not cut off and if the country commits to the erosion of democratic principles and religious freedom. Biden's goals to connect with European allies may have also been stagnated by the Aukus deal, which diminished trust between France and the United States.

It was ultimately seen that Biden's strategy is an attempt to set the United States back down a traditional course in the Indo-Pacific – one that emphasizes cooperation over direct competition. This shift indicates the United States' desire to reaffirm a role as a dependable ally in the region. Whether the strategy will realize Biden's goals remains to be seen.

Works Cited

- BBC News. "Aukus Pact: France and US Seek to Mend Rift," September 23, 2021, sec. Europe. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-58659627>.
- Biden, Joseph. "INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGY of the UNITED STATES." *Whitehouse.gov*. Washington DC: Executive Office of the President, April 11, 2022. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf>.
- Biswas, Soutik. "Ukraine: India 'Feeling the Heat' over Neutrality." *BBC News*, March 25, 2022, sec. India. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-60857406>.
- Clinton, Hillary. "America's Pacific Century." *Foreign Policy*. Foreign Policy, October 11, 2011. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/americas-pacific-century/>.
- Freeman, Carla, Daniel Markey, and Vikram J. Singh. "A Closer Look at Biden's Indo-Pacific Strategy." United States Institute of Peace, March 7, 2022. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/03/closer-look-bidens-indo-pacific-strategy>.
- Hass, Ryan. "Stronger: Adapting America's China Strategy in an Age of Competitive Interdependence." *Brookings*, January 11, 2021. <https://www.brookings.edu/books/stronger-adapting-americas-china-strategy-in-an-age-of-competitive-interdependence/>.
- Lieberthal, Kenneth G. "The American Pivot to Asia." *Brookings*. Brookings, December 21, 2011. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-american-pivot-to-asia/>.
- Mohan, Garima. "The New US Indo-Pacific Strategy and Its Implications for Europe."

GMFUS, February 17, 2022. <https://www.gmfus.org/news/new-us-indo-pacific-strategy-and-its-implications-europe>.

PTI. “Trump Administration Renames US Pacific Command as US Indo-Pacific Command.”

The Indian Express, May 31, 2018. <https://indianexpress.com/article/world/trump-administration-renames-us-pacific-command-as-us-indo-pacific-command-5198019/>.

United States Department of State. “Secretary Antony J. Blinken Remarks to the Press En Route Melbourne, Australia,” April 8, 2022. <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-remarks-to-the-press-en-route-melbourne-australia/>.

Seipel, Arnie, and Joe Hernandez. “Joe Manchin Says He Won’t Support President Biden’s Build Back Better Plan.” *NPR*, December 19, 2021, sec. Politics.

<https://www.npr.org/2021/12/19/1065636709/joe-manchin-says-he-cannot-support-bidens-build-back-better-plan?t=1652050489362>.

Office of the United States Trade Representative. “The United States Officially Withdraws from the Trans-Pacific Partnership | United States Trade Representative,” 2018. <https://ustr.gov/about-us/policy-offices/press-office/press-releases/2017/january/US-Withdraws-From-TPP>.

Trump. “A Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision.” *U.S. State Department*.

Washington DC: United States State Department, November 4, 2019.

<https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Free-and-Open-Indo-Pacific-4Nov2019.pdf>.

———. “U.S. Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific Declassified.” *Trump Whitehouse Archives*. Washington DC: Whitehouse Archives, 2021.

<https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/IPS-Final-Declass.pdf>.

Yarmuth, John A. “H.R.5376 - 117th Congress (2021-2022): Build Back Better Act.”

www.congress.gov, September 27, 2021. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/5376>.

Zeeshan, Mohamed. "India Rolls out Red Carpet for Russian Foreign Minister." [thediplomat.com](https://thediplomat.com/2022/04/india-rolls-out-red-carpet-for-russian-foreign-minister/). Accessed May 9, 2022. <https://thediplomat.com/2022/04/india-rolls-out-red-carpet-for-russian-foreign-minister/>.