

Moving Beyond “China, China, China” in the Indo-Pacific

John Schaus

The Biden administration is signaling the United States will return to a more traditional foreign policy in Asia: one that will prioritize allies and partners, call out autocrats, and be a vocal advocate for [human rights and democracy](#). The approach suggests that the United States will move away from its current, largely singular, focus on defense policy that prioritizes [“China, China, China.”](#)

As the new team begins to shape the administration’s policy and strategy, it is important to consider where we are as a country, and what has been missing from U.S. foreign policy over the past four years.

Q1: Is “China, China, China” the right approach?

A1: No. A single-minded focus on any one country is bound to be unsuccessful for the United States, its global interests, and its global security commitments. U.S. security does not hinge solely on one threat: combating climate change, reducing nuclear proliferation, preventing conventional conflict, and promoting alliances and partnerships are all important. A singular focus on only one of our security interests will distort U.S. strategy.

However, though a singular focus on China is unsustainable over the long term, the Trump administration's narrow, almost exclusive prioritization on China has revealed a serious U.S. security vulnerability: across nearly every measure, the Department of Defense (DoD) is unprepared for the range of possible demands that may be placed on it to deter China, defend our allies in the region, or defeat the People’s Liberation Army in a confrontation where U.S. interests are at stake.

This shortfall is likely true for U.S. interests in [other parts of the world](#), as well. The consequences of falling short in a China confrontation are greater, however, than in other regions. This is because the United States’ alliance architecture in Asia is less robust than it is in Europe, for example. Also, the operational distances are often far greater than U.S. forces have become accustomed to while deployed to Central Command in the Middle East over the past 30 years.

Q2: What does U.S. security strategy miss when the main focus is on China?

A2: Simply put, allies and partners.

In February 2020, a thoughtful Filipino academic posed to me this question: “The United States believes it is competing with China. That is fine. Do you know what you are competing for?”

His question highlighted that—at least as he viewed it—the United States had focused more in recent years on “out-competing” China than it had on cultivating the alliances and partnerships needed to tangibly advance U.S. interests. At least in part, the answer to the academic’s question is that U.S. success in competition in Asia—and arguably globally—should be measured in its ability to expand and deepen alliances and partnerships.

Q3: What do U.S. allies and partners want?

A3: More U.S. engagement, and not just on defense issues.

U.S. allies would like to see a reliable partner with policies that consistently support them, unlike the autocratic regimes about which they worry. The Biden administration will likely hit this mark easily. In his first two days in office, Secretary of State Antony Blinken [spoke with 19 foreign leaders](#), including all U.S. treaty allies in Asia. This is an early signal that the Biden administration will [prioritize engagement](#) with allies and partners on solutions to common challenges.

Nearly all allies would also welcome increased U.S. investment and trade in their regions. A consistent message from countries throughout the Indo-Pacific is that they seek to avoid having to choose between security or prosperity. They see the past four years of U.S. policy focused on security arrangements as the United States doubling down on this schism, rather than providing them an alternative to dependence on China for a disproportionate share of their prosperity. For example, throughout the Trump administration, the United States imposed tariffs with equal zeal against [allies of 70 years](#) as it did against [China](#), the country that U.S. security officials claim most concerned them. Antagonizing its allies leaves the United States less able to build a coalition to counter “might makes right” approaches—like those pursued by China. It also limits the United States’ ability to drive consensus in favor of a model wherein all countries benefit when they agree on rules in advance and are held to those agreements.

The Covid-19 pandemic—and recently, access to new vaccines—have also emerged as major geopolitical issues for many states in Asia. China is working to [provide millions of doses](#) of vaccines to countries in the region. Despite the [low reported efficacy](#) of China’s vaccines, countries are accepting them because partial vaccination is seen as better than none.

Q4: Where should the Biden administration begin?

A4: Career professionals across the U.S. government in civil service, foreign service, and the military are well acquainted with the challenges of establishing trust and confidence with foreign partners as part of an approach to achieve common objectives. President Biden’s incoming Asia team is similarly well versed in the challenges they will face in their efforts to reorient U.S. foreign policy and rebuild credibility with allies and partners. They also know from experience that both style and substance are a prerequisite to achieving U.S. foreign policy objectives.

As the Biden administration shapes its early action plan, it should prioritize the three Ps for Asia: the pandemic, the Philippines, and the Pacific Deterrence Initiative.

The pandemic and its consequences remain a national security threat for allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific, just as for the United States. Focusing early engagement in the Indo-Pacific to build common cause on pandemic response would support people-to-people ties and give credibility to a long-standing U.S. claim that U.S. interests are

about more than hard-power balancing against a rising China. It has the added advantage of putting civilian agencies and objectives at the forefront of U.S. diplomatic efforts.

Second, in the Philippines, pandemic response and long-term U.S. security interests intersect. President Rodrigo Duterte [has threatened](#) to make the continuation of the U.S.-Philippines Visiting Forces Agreement contingent on the United States' willingness to assist the Philippines in securing 20 million doses of the Covid-19 vaccine. Given the current global shortfall in vaccine doses, it seems a large ask. The United States is rightly unlikely to accede to what appears to be an ultimatum. The Biden administration should prioritize its outreach to the Philippines and identify an action plan to focus on the Philippines' interests beyond just hard security. Developing—and implementing—a plan that contributes to economic security, health security, and human security would demonstrate the United States' commitment to assisting like-minded countries in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and enabling them to avoid having [to choose between a Chinese or U.S.](#) approach.

Third, the Pacific Deterrence Initiative (PDI) is a fund for DoD that plays a similar role to that of the [European Reassurance Initiative](#), which was established following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. It was designed to signal U.S. resolve to allies and partners in Europe by enabling more consistent U.S. military presence. DoD should focus on leveraging PDI resources to develop exercises that stress test the U.S. military's capability and capacity to achieve specific objectives with current—and expected future—capabilities. One way to do this, and perhaps drive jointness at the same time, would be to direct multi-service or even fully joint exercises in the Indo-Pacific to explore what next steps are needed to move from the current independent service concepts to integrated joint operations.

Even as the Biden administration increasingly shapes its Asia strategy around a renewed focus on its allies and partners in the region, it will still have to maintain pressure on China. Secretary of State Blinken's statement that China's persecution of its Uighur minority [constitutes genocide](#) and John Kerry's warning [that climate cooperation will not be a bargaining chip for other priorities](#) are early markers that the pressure against China will remain. President Biden's [intent to preserve](#), at least for now, tariffs on imports from China makes the pressure concrete.

Rebuilding constructive, mutual relationships with allies and partners—combined with clear-eyed engagement with China—will be key to reorienting U.S. policy in Asia. The Biden administration has taken positive steps at the outset. Sustaining engagement and focus across both domestic and global challenges and crises will be the real test.

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