

The COVID-19 Pandemic and Geopolitics in the Indo-Pacific: A View from the United States

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The COVID-19 pandemic poses significant geopolitical challenges and presents opportunities for the United States in the Indo-Pacific. The Trump administration bungled the crisis, damaging the U.S.'s standing as a paragon of competence in public health, and functional governance more generally. The international face of the U.S. response deepened preexisting concerns—especially significant in the Indo-Pacific—that the U.S. had retreated from its post-Second World War and post-Cold War role of providing international public goods and leadership and supporting international institutions.

Opportunities for the U.S. amid the crisis and in its aftermath stem primarily from shortcomings or unappealing features in China's handling of the epidemic, and stumbles in China's self-presentation as a provider of foreign assistance and international cooperation, and from U.S. policies—many of them embraced by the Biden administration—that could correct missteps and ameliorate trends that have diminished U.S. standing (especially during Donald Trump's presidency). For the U.S. to reap potential gains, it also must adapt its policies to the implications of some Indo-Pacific states' comparatively successful responses to the pandemic, and the pandemic-spotlighted nature of contemporary international problems.¹

U.S. Failure at Home and Its Implications Abroad

The impact of the COVID-19 crisis on U.S. stature in the Indo-Pacific has been strikingly negative.² The incompetence of the American response—especially by the Trump administration—damaged the U.S.'s long-standing image as a world leader in public health (especially through the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention), and as a better-than-dysfunctional state.³ With less than one-twentieth of the world's population, but one-fifth of global deaths and one-quarter of worldwide cases more than a year into the pandemic, the U.S. compared very unfavorably to world averages and, especially, to many countries in the Indo-Pacific.⁴ As one European commentator remarked, the United States has been admired, envied, hated, and feared in the post-Second World War era, but never before pitied.⁵ The U.S. suffered the further indignity of being among the countries whose citizens were particularly unwelcome to travel internationally, including in the Indo-Pacific.⁶

The U.S. image took further blows as critical voices in the region, including Chinese sources, linked accounts of pandemic failure to a storyline that included the Black Lives Matter protests and the election-related chaos that culminated in the January 6, 2021 pro-Trump insurrectionary assault on the Capitol.⁷ Potential gains from U.S.-based companies' development of highly effective vaccines were undermined by a slow and disorganized initial effort to distribute doses.⁸

The Trump administration's pandemic-related foreign policy compounded these problems. Belated and patchwork, but abrupt and provocative, bans on travel from China and elsewhere mirrored the chaotic and ineffective approach at home. The administration adopted a nationalist approach to fighting an international pandemic, signaling abandonment of a U.S. leadership role in a border-disregarding crisis.⁹ Despite belated moves to increase modest levels of aid, the U.S. relinquished its familiar place as a provider of assistance to address a burgeoning global problem.¹⁰ Chinese official sources, especially, sought to highlight the U.S.'s uncooperative approach, and—mirroring the darkest charges U.S. sources leveled against China—even insinuated that the virus came from the U.S. military.¹¹

COVID-19, the WHO, and U.S. Retreat from International Institutions

As the COVID-19 crisis unfolded, the Trump administration attacked the World Health Organization (WHO)—the principal UN-affiliated body for addressing threats to international public health. It charged that the WHO had been too slow to raise the alarm about the new and dangerous disease because the organization was too solicitous toward, complicit with, or influenced by China. U.S. statements assailed the WHO and its director-general for failing to fulfill their duties and commending China’s initial response (following Trump’s early praise for Xi Jinping’s handling of the outbreak).¹²

The Trump administration sought to blame the epidemic’s impact in the U.S. on the WHO, claiming “so much death has been caused by their mistakes,” including the WHO’s having “pushed China’s misinformation” and having “fought” Trump’s limit on flights from China.¹³ In mid-2020, it announced that the U.S. would withhold contributions to the WHO, depriving the organization of one-fifth of its core budget and a significant part of its voluntary contributions. Trump gave notice that the U.S. would leave the WHO and not participate in its consortium to develop and distribute vaccines.¹⁴

This response to the pandemic extended a broader Trump-era turn away from international institutions and the rules-based order associated with them. The United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), the International Criminal Court (ICC), the World Trade Organization (WTO), and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) all faced denunciation for alleged unfairness to the United States. In some cases (such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), the Paris Accords, and the UNHRC), Washington announced a full withdrawal.¹⁵ Under Trump, the United States had become an openly revisionist power.¹⁶

American skepticism toward established international institutions had been building before Trump. Barack Obama’s efforts to bring the U.S. into the Paris Accords required inventive uses of executive action in the absence of congressional support, and the U.S. had never joined the Kyoto Protocol to the UNFCCC.¹⁷ The TPP—the first large-scale multilateral U.S. trade accord since the WTO—was foundering in Congress during Obama’s tenure. U.S. accession to the Rome Treaty for the ICC, the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights had remained unachieved for decades. The UN and other multilateral organizations have been targets of long-running and growing American criticism for their dependence on U.S. funding and non-alignment with U.S. interests and preferences.¹⁸

These developments reflect a view that it no longer serves national interests for the U.S. to bear many of the costs—whether directly (providing material resources for multilateral bodies) or more obliquely (countenancing cheating or free-riding, or providing incentives and sanctions to police nonconforming behavior)—now that a relatively declining U.S. receives a smaller share of the regime’s benefits and faces growing demands from rising powers, especially China, to revise rules to suit their agendas. The U.S.’s hegemonic decline is perilous for international institutions, such as the WHO, especially when China and other powers have not been willing and able to take on roles long played by the U.S.¹⁹

Viral Blame Game: U.S.-China Ideological Conflict and the Pandemic

Another dimension of the Trump administration's response to COVID-19 was a push to blame China for the pandemic. Senior administration officials, members of Congress, and Republican politicians charged that China was responsible for the coronavirus's effects in the U.S. and around the world. They called COVID-19 "the China Virus," "the Wuhan Virus," and even "the Kung Flu." They attributed U.S. troubles to China's withholding information and holding sway over the WHO.²⁰ Dubious claims alleged the virus originated in a Chinese lab, or was a bioweapon, or was released intentionally.²¹ Bills in Congress called for imposing legal liability on China for COVID-related harm in the United States. Although more strident on the Republican side, the coronavirus-accelerated turn in views about China extended across the partisan divide.²² The indictment stressed broad features of China's domestic political order. For example, Secretary of State Pompeo condemned China's "censor[ing] discussion of the pandemic," and declared that China and other "authoritarian regimes" are "poorly designed to deal" with a crisis such as the pandemic while democracies, including the United States, "will deliver the right outcome."²³

These politics reinforced trends in U.S.-China relations that some prominent observers described as a potential or incipient new Cold War.²⁴ The Trump administration sought to draw distinctions between the "Chinese Communist Party" (CCP), on the one hand, and "China" or "the Chinese people," on the other hand, and flirted with advocating "regime change."²⁵ In 2017, the U.S.'s National Security Strategy had declared China an adversary on many fronts, including values, in a whole-of-society conflict.²⁶ The Trump-era "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" policy sought to rally democratic states and put China on the opposite side of a regional ideological divide.²⁷ A major China policy document declared that China "seeks to transform the international order to align with CCP interests and ideology" and is "engaged in an ideological competition with the West."²⁸

The belief that "constructive engagement"—integrating China into the global market-based economy and international institutions, and weaving dense political, social, intellectual, and other ties between China and the outside world—would make China more status quo-supporting internationally (and perhaps more liberal and incipiently democratic at home) had been crumbling for years. In its place had formed a bipartisan consensus that relations were at least as rivalrous as they were cooperative, and that the U.S. needed to be tougher on China (although there was less agreement about policy details).²⁹ In Washington, and in Beijing as well, the pandemic accelerated a long-brewing slide toward an ideational rivalry conducive to discord and polarization in regional politics.

Toward Decoupling: COVID and "Securitizing" Economic Issues

The pandemic sharpened a trend in the U.S. toward characterizing economic issues in relations with China as national security problems.³⁰ Chinese manufacturers were an indispensable source to meet spiraling U.S. demand for ventilators, Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), components for COVID test kits, and pharmaceutical inputs. Worries about dependence grew amid reports of defective or fake products, fraudulent contracts,³¹ and possible use of state control over exports as a source of international political

leverage.³² Calls grew for rebuilding U.S. manufacturing capacity in public health-related sectors, primarily to reduce vulnerability to China.³³ Matters grew worse when the U.S. Department of Justice indicted Chinese hackers for allegedly targeting U.S. firms working on COVID-19 vaccines. These developments unfolded against the backdrop of worries that China could outpace the U.S. in vaccine development, further diminishing U.S. international stature and enhancing China's cachet and influence (or, alternatively, delivering a subpar Chinese vaccine to a vulnerable world).³⁴ The Trump administration embraced a go-it-alone strategy—opting out of cooperative efforts to develop and share vaccines and treatments, and briefly contemplating moves to acquire exclusive rights to a potential vaccine from a foreign company, buy the entire stock of a promising therapeutic drug, and invoke national security powers to prohibit PPE exports and redirect to U.S. markets an American company's overseas production.³⁵

Critics saw the Trump administration using the pandemic to press its preexisting agenda of economic decoupling from China.³⁶ Trump's so-called trade war, and some of China's responses, entailed an assault on long-term patterns of interdependence, yielding escalating tariffs that reduced demand in each country's markets for the other's exports, U.S. bans or threatened bans of major Chinese technology companies in U.S. markets, mounting concerns among U.S. businesses about retaliation from Chinese authorities, and, in turn, serious threats to intricate global supply chains across the Indo-Pacific region.³⁷

Before Trump came to power, long-standing and increasingly bipartisan U.S. concerns about China's domestic and foreign economic policies and practices—condemned as unfair to U.S. interests and inconsistent with international rules—were becoming more urgent and consequential.³⁸ China was moving rapidly into higher technology sectors, potentially threatening large and dynamic parts of the U.S. economy and posing national security—as well as national economic security—challenges. Under Xi, China had adopted more assertive industrial policy, economic nationalism, and statist economic policies that sought leadership or dominance in emerging technology industries.³⁹ Beijing's long-running pursuit of trade agreements, and the Xi-era push for investment in infrastructure projects abroad through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), increased prospects of a fissure between U.S.- and China-centered spheres in a less integrated international economy, including in sectors relevant to fighting pandemics.⁴⁰ From both sides came escalating challenges to the deep and long-growing interdependence between the U.S. and China and among many Indo-Pacific economies that had underpinned a long era of stability and prosperity.

International Power Shifts and the Pandemic

The U.S.'s flummoxed response, protracted epidemic, and deep and comparatively long economic downturn arguably signaled the erosion of U.S. power—especially in the Indo-Pacific and in comparison to China, where the effects of initial failures in handling the outbreak were less devastating and consequences more short-lived.⁴¹ COVID-driven reductions in U.S. naval deployments and cancellation of military training exercises (prominently, in East Asia) were minor blips, but they resonated with broader concerns about U.S. hard power. China's taking a prominent mid-pandemic role at the WHO—including Xi's speech to the 2020 World Health Assembly (WHA)—and advocating international collaboration to address COVID-19 appeared to show Beijing stepping into a vacuum created by the U.S.'s retrenchment under Trump.

Trump-era actions worsened worries about a functional decline in U.S. power. Erratic, unilateralist, at times accommodating to, and praising of, China, North Korea, and Russia, and questioning security commitments to, or demanding more contributions from, allies and friends from East Asia to Europe, Trump foreign policy provided a “proof of concept” that precipitous American decline or withdrawal was possible. Reassuring statements from senior officials about U.S. commitments and substantial (if likely unsustainable) increases in defense spending could not undo the damage.

Assessments that the U.S. needed to rebuild capacity and credibility to address China’s emergence as a principal global challenger and security threat predated the Trump administration’s China-focused national security documents.⁴² Defense planning increasingly had emphasized China contingencies, especially after disputes in the South and East China seas flared anew in the 2010s. Obama’s “pivot” or “rebalance” to Asia had promised to refocus U.S. attention and assets toward the Indo-Pacific and had seen the TPP as an economic complement to regional security policy.⁴³

At best, increasingly adversarial great power politics portended additional challenges for any multilateral approach to managing the pandemic and kindred future threats. At worst, they pointed to greatly increased risk of disruptive conflict between a previously dominant power and a rising rival seeking to remake regional and international orders to accommodate its interests and preferences.⁴⁴

Impact and Implications in the Indo-Pacific

These developments pose several substantial challenges for regional order in the Indo-Pacific and, in turn, geopolitics in which Indo-Pacific issues loom large. First, the COVID-amplified problems of international institutions, including the WHO, have especially troubling implications for the Indo-Pacific, where regional institutions are not robust⁴⁵ and global institutions are therefore all the more important. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is the most notable exception, but it is merely subregional, beset by internal divisions (some born of members’ disparate relations with China), and anchors only diffuse and *ad hoc* broader regional arrangements (many of them in the form of loose “ASEAN+” structures). China’s preference for informal bilateral negotiations and agreements has been inimical to the development of strong region-wide institutions and accords.⁴⁶ Groupings that straddle some intra-regional cleavages, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (expanded to include India, with which China has a fraught relationship), the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP, established in late 2020), and BRI-related initiatives are far from comprehensive and remain institutionally thin.

Declining U.S. support and limited Chinese backing for universal institutions such as the WHO are especially problematic in the Indo-Pacific due to regional risk factors. As COVID-19 (like SARS before it) made clear, countries located along China’s periphery and lacking much influence over Beijing’s behavior are particularly vulnerable to pandemic threats (which often emanate from China), and thus are especially imperiled when the WHO is besieged or hobbled, whether by the U.S. or China.

Second, a COVID-exacerbated ideational rivalry between the U.S. and China has highly troubling implications for Indo-Pacific states. They are at the frontlines of U.S.-China frictions, have benefited greatly from many years of relatively good U.S.-China relations, and have long sought to avoid taking sides.⁴⁷ A U.S.-China rivalry that focuses on zero-sum conflicts over values and political system types—rather than disputes over more tangible issues, which tend to be more amenable to bargaining and compromise—increases stress on a fault line between democratic and authoritarian regimes, particularly within Southeast Asia but also across the Indo-Pacific region.

Third, movement toward U.S.-China economic decoupling, hastened by the pandemic, would imperil, or at least unsettle, arrangements that have disproportionately benefited Indo-Pacific economies. Integration into global value chains of production and sales, in which the U.S. and China are the largest participants, has driven impressive growth that stretches from highly advanced Japan, to rapidly transforming Vietnam, and, at least incipiently, into South Asia. Prospects for still-deeper integration had seemed bright when the U.S.-led TPP and the PRC-centered RCEP neared launch. But such hopes faded when Trump announced that the U.S. would opt out of the TPP, India did not join the RCEP, and concerns grew in the region about the economic terms and political motivations of the BRI.⁴⁸

Pandemic-intensified moves to diversify U.S. supply chains away from China promised some upside for some Indo-Pacific economies, given the limited potential for onshoring to the United States.⁴⁹ But many East Asian economies that are deeply integrated with both China and the United States faced risks that Washington would apply national security-based export controls or impose sanctions with extraterritorial reach if regional tech firms continued to sell to customers, or collaborate with partners, in China. A pointed example of these challenges is the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company, which sells heavily to China's Huawei, has defense-related contracts in the United States, and incurred pressure from both the U.S. and China to invest in production in their markets.⁵⁰ In the longer run, a shift in the previously integrated global economy toward U.S.-led and PRC-led spheres would diminish opportunities—or at least create serious uncertainty—for regional states that have benefited immensely from decades of growing economic interdependence.⁵¹

Fourth, the prospect of a significant decline in U.S. power (primarily relative to China)—whether due to waning resources or eroding will—is especially consequential in the Indo-Pacific.⁵² Both Washington and Beijing see vital interests at stake in the region, increasing the risk that regional states may become pawns, and prizes, in greater powers' competition. In the Indo-Pacific—and especially in East Asia—China has advantages of proximity that enhance its relative power, narrowing the effective gap with the United States. The region also is the principal locus of China's self-defined “core interests,” while the Indo-Pacific is a less predominant concern for the United States, which has uniquely global interests and commitments and is present in the region by choice (and assessment of interests) rather than geographic necessity. Notably, the U.S. has sought to leverage its own resources through strengthening security ties with regional partners (including formal treaty allies, democratic polities, and others), and to reassure friends and allies of the reliability and durability of U.S. engagement (from the Obama-era pivot, through the FOIP, and many statements by senior U.S. officials, even during the Trump presidency, and on to Biden's reemphasis on regional alliances and partnerships).⁵³

Many regional states face difficult decisions about how much to bandwagon with China, or hedge and balance with the United States, in security policy. On more dire scenarios, an aphorism and its corollary resonate in the Indo-Pacific: when elephants (or in a variant more suited to parts of the region, tigers) fight, the grass suffers; and one unchecked rogue elephant (or tiger) also can be damaging to what lives underfoot.⁵⁴

U.S. Opportunities from China's Challenges

The U.S. does have opportunities for geopolitical gains or, at least, recovery in the Indo-Pacific. Some stem from weak points in China's efforts to derive political advantage from its handling of the pandemic. First, China presented itself to international audiences as a success story in controlling COVID-19 and as a model for others. Chinese sources, along with outside observers, touted the containment achieved through: locking down the initial epicenter in Wuhan; suspending travel and economic and social activity across the country; deploying immense amounts of medical personnel, equipment, and emergency hospital construction teams to afflicted areas; implementing massive-scale contact-tracing and tracking through labor-intensive monitoring at the building or neighborhood level and through big data-based, AI-enabled tools; and imposing strict quarantines and mobility controls.⁵⁵ By early 2020, a Foreign Ministry spokesman praised China's "signature strength, efficiency and speed" in combatting the pandemic and noted that China's approach had been "widely acclaimed" internationally.⁵⁶ Chinese analysts called for other countries to "resolutely adopt China's model," which was the "only proven successful" one.⁵⁷ Xi Jinping's 2021 New Year's address celebrated China's successful "epic ... fight against the pandemic" and referenced conversations sharing China's insights with foreign counterparts.⁵⁸

Such portrayals sought to bolster China's stature, especially given the contrast with U.S. failures.⁵⁹ But any gains were limited or fragile—and left open opportunities for the U.S.—because aspects of China's approach at home lacked appeal abroad, particularly in democratic polities in the Indo-Pacific.⁶⁰ China's methods were strikingly repressive and relied on highly intrusive monitoring and control, including residents' committees, urban grid management systems, other party-state-led watchdogs, and intensification of the already-formidable surveillance state. After a brief period of some openness, authorities censored, silenced, and deterred social and conventional media exposés of the government's crisis response. The regime operated without the constraints of civil liberties, privacy rights, civil society, or legal means for limiting or challenging government action characteristic of liberal democracies (and some authoritarian regimes) in many Indo-Pacific states.⁶¹

Second, China pursued influence through COVID-related foreign policies that went beyond showcasing competence at home to present China as a benevolent provider of foreign aid and international cooperation. An official White Paper declared that China "acted with a keen sense of responsibility to humanity... and the international community."⁶² An expert quoted in the *Global Times* asserted that China deserved credit as "the whistleblower for the world" on COVID-19.⁶³ China's dominant role in manufacturing essential supplies for coping with COVID-19 gave it a prominent role in efforts to address the pandemic everywhere.⁶⁴ State and non-state actors made, and publicized, donations to Indo-Pacific states, including poorer countries in South and Southeast Asia, outpacing early contributions from the U.S. and other Western powers.⁶⁵ Beijing also dispatched Chinese medical and public health experts, in person or via teleconference, to share hard-won experience on combatting COVID-19.⁶⁶

In addressing the WHA's 2020 session, Xi pledged more than \$2 billion in aid to defeat COVID-19 and to promote economic recovery, especially in developing countries, and promised that China's vaccine would be a "global public good" available to all⁶⁷ and especially to poor countries, some in the Indo-Pacific—a pointed contrast to the approaches of the United States and other rich countries, which focused on securing supplies for themselves.⁶⁸ In a January 2021 address to virtual Davos, Xi recounted China's COVID-related assistance to other states and international organizations and vowed continuing collaboration in combatting the pandemic and making vaccines available, especially to the developing world.⁶⁹ In a speech to the Boao Forum in April 2021, Xi connected the fight against COVID-19 to China's support for international economic openness (to speed economic recovery), international public health cooperation (including support for the WHO, research and development cooperation, and the co-production of vaccines that China was undertaking in Indo-Pacific BRI partner states), eschewal of a new Cold War, and pan-Asian solidarity (implicitly marginalizing the U.S. in the region).⁷⁰ Other Chinese officials similarly linked Beijing's COVID diplomacy to China's self-portrayal as a benevolent international actor more generally, presenting a "health silk road" as part of the BRI and including a "community of shared health for humankind" within the "community of shared future for humankind."⁷¹

Here, too, China's possible wins were undercut by weak points.⁷² Complaints emerged of price-gouging by Chinese suppliers selling scarce products on international markets, and quality problems with sold or donated equipment. Some foreign analysts asserted that China might be steering aid and sales based on the state of relations with recipient countries, or using modest assistance programs to wring diplomatic support on issues important to Beijing.⁷³ Much of the backstory to COVID diplomacy threatened to undermine China's narrative: the pandemic's origin in Chinese territory, its apparent roots in China's lax regulation of wildlife markets, flaws in China's initial response to the outbreak, and so on.⁷⁴

With Beijing's focus on developing countries, its assistance programs largely bypassed the Indo-Pacific's many well-off states. Among aid-receiving countries and other states in the region, some publics and politicians were skeptical about the quality of vaccines from China (given prior vaccine scandals in China, quality problems with Chinese-made PPE and other equipment early in the pandemic, and later-emerging concerns about the efficacy of China's COVID vaccine and the opacity of trial data), and concerned about what Beijing would expect in return for its pandemic help.⁷⁵ For many in the region, any turn to China had shallow roots: it was more a matter of *faute de mieux* than genuine enthusiasm.⁷⁶

Even if the pandemic and its aftermath bring soft power gains or diplomatic boons for Beijing, they are unlikely to be so transformative as to overcome the challenges facing China's quest for influence, particularly in the Indo-Pacific.⁷⁷ Many regional states have well-entrenched wariness toward China's rising power, Beijing's increasingly assertive foreign policy substance and style (exemplified by "wolf warrior" diplomacy), and the PRC's unattractive (at least to liberal democracies) model of governance.⁷⁸ In this context, a depleted and tarnished U.S. can find openings to preserve or recoup political influence and stature.

U.S. Opportunities with a New Administration

Geopolitical opportunities for the United States in the Indo-Pacific in the wake of COVID-19 will expand if the U.S. undoes some of the damage wrought by its behavior during the pandemic's first year and ameliorates developments occurring during the Trump administration and under its predecessors. The fresh start of a new presidency, rapid distribution of highly effective vaccines to a very high proportion—by world standards—of the population, nearly two trillion dollars in government spending to speed recovery from the economic impact of COVID-19, and the adoption of policies to provide vaccines to other countries, all offer chances to rehabilitate U.S. standing (although the potential gains face some risk from plateauing rates amid vaccine hesitance in the U.S. and persistently cavernous gaps in vaccine availability between the U.S. and most other countries).⁷⁹ The Biden administration's broader foreign policy agenda promises to address many of the COVID-exacerbated challenges it inherited, and to exploit opportunities, particularly in the Indo-Pacific, that arise from vulnerabilities in China's pursuit of political gains amid the pandemic.⁸⁰

Rapid and deep reversals of trends that predated (and in some cases long preceded) COVID-19, and which accelerated during the pandemic, are unlikely. The implications are mixed for U.S. prospects for geopolitical gains in the Indo-Pacific. First, in the U.S.-China ideational contest, the Biden administration retrenched from the Trump era's widely alienating vituperation and assertions of American moral superiority. But a harder-edged policy toward China has endured and emphasizes values (now framed in more universal terms). Washington has a now-well-entrenched bipartisan consensus that constructive engagement must be superseded by an approach that is—in Secretary of State Blinken's phrase—"competitive when it should be, collaborative when it can be, and adversarial when it must be" toward China across many issues and in a quest for influence in the Indo-Pacific.⁸¹ The readout of Biden's first call as president with Xi (which was much less upbeat than China's version) declared "preserving a free and open Indo-Pacific" to be a priority and "underscored" Biden's "fundamental concerns" about Beijing's "crackdown in Hong Kong, human rights abuses in Xinjiang" (which the U.S. dubbed genocide), "and increasingly assertive actions in the region, including toward Taiwan."⁸² At the first ministry-level bilateral meeting of the Biden years, Blinken and National Security Advisor Sullivan sounded many of the same themes and reiterated Washington's determination to press them in relations with China. At that meeting and during the National People's Congress 2021 session, top Chinese foreign policy officials Yang Jiechi and Wang Yi struck similarly politically charged notes, challenging U.S. claims to the mantle of universal values.⁸³

More broadly, other statements from the Biden administration—echoing or amplifying its predecessors—emphasized shared democratic values as a linchpin of U.S. solidarity with allied and friendly states in the Indo-Pacific, and as a point of friction with China.⁸⁴ The Biden administration's returning of human rights and democracy to more prominent and consistent places in U.S. foreign policy foreshadows ongoing values-driven alignments and conflicts, especially in the Indo-Pacific. With U.S.-China ideational conflict intensifying from both sides, the Biden-era American hope, and bet, for rebuilding influence is that "values" offer favorable terrain on which to compete for influence in the region.

Second, although the Biden administration has turned away from the decoupling agenda that the Trump administration fitfully pursued and that threatened to disrupt Indo-Pacific economies, full reversion to the deep-integration-supporting international economic liberalism that characterized U.S. pursuit of the TPP and, before it, the WTO is not in the offing. Trump's tariffs on Chinese imports were not among the many policies quickly reversed by the new administration (although there was a partial pause in measures against some Chinese tech companies).⁸⁵ The Biden administration continued its predecessors' emphasis on long-standing U.S. complaints about China's economic policies and practices, especially ones affecting tech sectors that are important to the U.S. and some Indo-Pacific countries. Biden policy statements have echoed adversarial aspects of Obama-era foreign economic policy that characterized the U.S. and China as competing to write the future rules of the global economy. In his February 2021 call with Xi, Biden stressed that his "fundamental concerns" included China's "coercive and unfair economic practices." Later that month, Biden issued an executive order—partly prompted by PPE shortages during the pandemic's early days, and specifically addressing pharmaceuticals, semiconductors, and batteries for electric vehicles—to improve supply chain resilience, largely by increasing domestic production (inevitably, partly at the expense of Indo-Pacific suppliers).⁸⁶ The broader Biden economic agenda—which includes protecting U.S. jobs, making public investments in technology sectors, and cooperating with countries that share U.S. concerns about China's economic behavior—portends continued wariness toward, and reduction of, dependence on global supply chains that include China. Tellingly, Biden framed his massive infrastructure plan partly in terms of U.S. competition with China.⁸⁷ China has mirrored U.S. moves, with a Five-Year Plan and other economic policies that called for greater economic and technological self-sufficiency and adopted an apparent tit-for-tat approach to economic sanctions,⁸⁸ and statements that framed China's rapid post-pandemic GDP gains, rising intra-Asian trade and investment, and the BRI as drivers for regional and global growth.⁸⁹ For Indo-Pacific economies, these diverse developments create a mix of risks and opportunities, and can strengthen the U.S.' position to the extent that regional states react by aligning with the U.S. or accommodating its policies, or at least steering away from much-increased dependence on, and resulting vulnerability to, China.

Third, Biden's security agenda seeks to limit the shift in power from the U.S. toward China, and its consequences in the Indo-Pacific. Biden has vowed to rebuild relations with regional friends and allies that share Washington's assessment of mounting threats from China. He has pledged to be in "lockstep" with allies and partners in the region and has characterized alliances and partnerships as "force multipliers."⁹⁰ The administration quickly moved to spotlight and strengthen the Quad—the previously loose security alignment among the U.S., Japan, India, and Australia that has focused on challenges from China. Biden's State Department extended the Trump-era turn toward more robust support for Taiwan, calling Beijing's military pressure on Taipei a threat to regional peace and security, declaring the U.S. commitment to standing with "friends and allies in the region," including Taiwan, "to advance our shared prosperity, security, and values in the Indo-Pacific region."⁹¹ These moves dovetailed with calls for a longer-term project of strengthening domestic foundations of U.S. international power through investments in education, technology, and infrastructure, and repairing battered democratic norms and government institutions. If successful, these measures can shift—in the U.S.'s favor—the strategic balance with China in the Indo-Pacific and rebuild the credibility—with both friends and foes—of U.S. security commitments in the region.

Fourth, more dramatic changes seem more likely in U.S. reengagement with, and a resumption of leadership in, multilateral institutions, including the WHO, and a return to U.S.-led international cooperation more broadly—a sharp reversal of one of the most dramatic shifts of the Trump years. Biden moved quickly to rejoin the WHO (and its COVID-19 vaccine initiative), along with ending the exit from the Paris Climate Accords and re-engaging the UNHRC.⁹² COVID-19-related policy shifts include rebuilding or deepening international engagement and collaboration: restoring “America’s role in leading the world through global crises” including those imperiling global health security; “supporting the international pandemic response effort” and “global vaccine distribution and research and development”; strengthening multilateral initiatives, including COVAX, and “public health and humanitarian cooperation” in responding to COVID-19 and future biological threats; providing pandemic and humanitarian relief; building capacity in the world’s “most vulnerable communities” to mitigate and recover from COVID-19; reviving the Obama-era Global Health Security Agenda; and rebuilding U.S. capacity to forecast, detect, and warn about potential pandemics.⁹³

More broadly, Biden declared that his administration would “place the United States back at the head of the table” and work to “mobilize collective action on global threats.” Recognizing that “[t]he world does not organize itself” and arguing that “Trump has bankrupted the United States’ word in the world,” Biden promised to return the U.S. to its post-Second World War “leading role in writing the rules, forging the agreements, and animating the institutions that guide relations among nations and advance collective prosperity and security.”⁹⁴ This agenda, if implemented, would rebuild a once-stout pillar of U.S. influence and stature, globally and in the international crisis-prone and institution-impoorer Indo-Pacific.

This restorationist agenda faces significant challenges and uncertainties, however. International institutions are more fragile in a post-hegemonic world, easily damaged and difficult to repair—all the more so where institutions have committed missteps, and faced calumny, on the scale of the WHO in the COVID crisis. The Biden administration is not offering unequivocal support for major institutions, expressing serious concerns about the adequacy and accuracy of an early 2021 report by a Beijing-constrained joint PRC-WHO team investigating COVID’s origins, and calling for reforms to address ongoing U.S. dissatisfaction with the UNHRC and the WTO.⁹⁵ Yet, in the American political context, Biden’s professed aims seem highly ambitious, given domestic opposition or skepticism toward international organizations and robust international cooperation, and they thus far do not clearly go beyond restoring the pre-Trump status quo of an already vulnerable and perhaps increasingly inadequate institutional infrastructure. Abroad, the agenda may not attract the trust and buy-in from vital partners whom the Biden administration has acknowledged it needs, and who may be wary of the durability of U.S. commitments (especially in the aftermath of the Trump presidency) and the efficacy of U.S. backing (given longer-term declines in U.S. relative power and resources). Washington’s efforts face pushback from Beijing, which questions the stability of the purported U.S. return and presses Chinese conceptions and solutions for global governance, especially in Asia.⁹⁶ The U.S. tasks of reengaging and supporting institutional orders may be particularly daunting in the Indo-Pacific, with the region’s thin institutional infrastructure and its position astride the most fraught fault lines in the troubled relationship between the U.S. and its nearest-peer competitor.

Adapting to a Changing Context of Actors and Issues

As the COVID-19 crisis has demonstrated, inadequate capacity or ineffective means for dealing with a pandemic or similar international threat can bring severe consequences, including geopolitical ones. Much of the agenda articulated by the Biden administration, and many of the opportunities for the U.S. to make pandemic-related or post-pandemic political gains in the Indo-Pacific region, involve efforts to build capabilities, and provide more effective mechanisms, for responding to COVID-19 and kindred potential crises, often with U.S. leadership. Notably, both Biden and Xi (as well as policy analysts) have identified pandemic response as one item on a very short list of policy areas—with climate change being the other most prominent example—where the U.S. and China see hope for cooperation.⁹⁷ But the pandemic also has shown that crisis responses by great powers at home, and undertaken or led by them internationally, may fall short. Experience with COVID-19, particularly in the Indo-Pacific, teaches at least two lessons about coping with major types of contemporary international threats.

First, the U.S.'s—and China's—ineffective or unattractive domestic responses to the epidemic and their often-not-well-received pandemic-related foreign policies contrasted unfavorably with some Indo-Pacific countries that were comparatively successful and benign in handling the novel coronavirus and thereby have provided compelling models and valuable assistance abroad. Although victories can be fragile and fleeting, several regional jurisdictions achieved extraordinarily low infection and death rates even during the pandemic's first waves and despite being at the front lines, geographically and socially proximate to China. A year into the pandemic, Taiwan reported under 1,000 cases and fewer than ten deaths in a population of 24 million. Despite having the limited medical and public health resources of a lower-middle income country, Vietnam reported fewer than 50 deaths and around 1,000 cases in a population of nearly 100 million. New Zealand had fewer than 2,400 cases and 26 deaths in a population of nearly four million—the lowest rates among any “Western” state with a substantial population. Although performance varies across the vast region, many Indo-Pacific countries were below—and most of East and Southeast Asia was far below—international averages and medians for fatalities and infections.⁹⁸

These jurisdictions achieved these accomplishments without repressive or highly authoritarian methods. Of course, battling COVID-19 imposed significant burdens on citizens, including mandatory quarantines and travel limits, privacy-encroaching and high-tech surveillance, some involuntary detentions, and so on, but Taiwan, New Zealand, South Korea, and other non-authoritarian regimes did not engage in substantial and widespread departures from established liberal rights and norms. Especially in polities along China's periphery, public health institutions and policy mechanisms established or improved in the aftermath of SARS proved notably effective. Policy was science-based. Civil society organizations mobilized and cooperated with authorities. Citizens followed public health directives from governments that provided considerable transparency, logistical competence, and material support. Vietnam relied more on public mobilization and extensive surveillance, but it did not impose severe lockdowns, and observers credited its success to competent and trusted government, especially at the local level.⁹⁹

Such displays of competence inevitably made the Indo-Pacific's high achievers exemplars for study and imitation, including in the United States.¹⁰⁰ Success also created openings for their governments to seek international stature through COVID diplomacy. Taiwan is the most striking example—not surprisingly, given its chronically tenuous position in the face of pressure from Beijing. In her May 2020 inaugural address and 2021 New Year's speech, President Tsai Ing-wen presented Taiwan as a model of how to achieve "what the world is longing for: a normal lifestyle." She noted how "Taiwan has amazed the international community," "appeared in headlines around the world," and "changed the way the international community views Taiwan" due to its "success in the fight against COVID-19," along with its democratic elections. Speaking to an "international audience," she remarked that "Taiwan has been proud to have worked alongside the international community" in combatting COVID-19 and to have "shown again and again that 'Taiwan can help,'" (a reference to the high-profile #TaiwanCanHelp campaign).¹⁰¹ Presenting itself as "a good global citizen," Taiwan provided millions of "made in Taiwan" masks and offered to share its pandemic-containment expertise with the WHO and other countries.¹⁰²

South Korea presented its response as a success in both public health and economic terms, pushed its "K-quarantine" as a global standard, and launched high-profile financial, material, and expertise assistance programs.¹⁰³ New Zealand's success through early aggressive action to "eliminate" the virus, and effective communication with the public, drew widespread international acclaim and study. Prime Minister Jacinda Adern offered then-President-elect Joe Biden access to New Zealand's senior public health officials to share her country's experience as the incoming U.S. administration devised plans to cope with the U.S.'s uncontained epidemic.¹⁰⁴

Finally, COVID-19 has underscored to a shaken world that some of the most serious international problems today and in the foreseeable future are not so amenable to solutions that rely on the distinctive assets of dominant powers—especially after the losses of prestige and reputation that the U.S., as well as China, have suffered.¹⁰⁵ Pandemics—like climate change, cyberthreats, terrorism, refugee flows, and other non-traditional security issues—present challenges and create crises for which hard-power-dependent and great power-led responses are often insufficient. Successful responses to many of the most serious challenges of our era are likely to require: learning from smaller states—including in the large and diverse Indo-Pacific region—that pursue innovative approaches or offer replicable models; and achieving cooperation and coordination among many states, rather than relying on solutions provided, or led, by one or a few powerful states. This shift seems to be reflected in a pair of recent events: the March 2021 call, from twenty-three countries (including Fiji and Indonesia, but not the U.S. or China) and the WHO, for a new multilateral treaty to address pandemics through greater transparency, global preparedness and cooperation, and equitable access to public health resources;¹⁰⁶ and the April 2021 Earth Day virtual summit hosted by Biden, and including Xi among dozens of national leaders from the Indo-Pacific and elsewhere, who pledged cooperative (if, by some measures, too modest) action on climate change.¹⁰⁷

Endnotes

- ¹ For an earlier version of some of the analysis in this chapter, with a focus on U.S.-China relations, see Jacques deLisle, “When Rivalry Goes Viral: COVID-19, U.S.-China Relations, and East Asia,” *Orbis* 65, no. 1 (Winter 2021): 46–74; and Jacques deLisle, “When the Fever Breaks?: COVID-19, U.S.-China Relations, and East Asia,” *Orbis* 65, no. 2 (Spring 2021).
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