

How the United States Gained Momentum over China in the Indo-Pacific

By Gilbert Rozman

In 2020 Xi Jinping was on a roll. Donald Trump had left U.S. alliances in disarray and the home front in discord, unable even to unite against a pandemic. U.S. allies South Korea and Japan saw China (and Russia too) in ways at odds with U.S. strategy—Moon Jae-in depending on it for his obsession with North Korean diplomacy, and Abe Shinzo awaiting a state visit from Xi in the hope of economic cooperation at odds with Trump's trade war. The entry of India into the SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organization), before a June 2020 Himalayan knife fight, seemed to give China the edge over Abe's appeal for a Quad, joining it with the U.S., Japan, and Australia. By 2023 the picture had changed dramatically. This article points to seven arenas where the U.S. under Joe Biden has gained appreciably in the Indo-Pacific at China's expense. Competition in reshaping the regional order is continuing; no verdict is yet possible on which side will gain the upper hand. The Chinese controlling strategy continues to vie against the U.S. blocking strategy.

The years 2021 to 2023 saw remarkable flux, as one initiative followed another with an eye to the geopolitical and geo-economic architecture of the Indo-Pacific. If in the 2010s the focus was on trade agreements, emphasis had shifted to military concerns and economic security. Biden outdid Xi Jinping in his affirmations of the new alphabet soup: the Quad,¹ AUKUS (Australia, the UK, the U.S.), IPEF (Indo-Pacific Economic Framework), and the NATO-AP4 (Asia-Pacific 4, Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand) dotted Biden's playbook before Xi responded with his GSI (Global Security Initiative). Xi also had available his creations of the 2010s, such as the BRI (Belt and Road Initiative) and SCO. Key to the struggle to shape the Indo-Pacific is ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) as well as India. As two camps solidified under the U.S. and China, the "Global South" overwhelmingly kept hedging its bets. Few are willing to take sides. Recent competition centers more on economic security and risk reduction than on public opinion.

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The nature of the competition has changed dramatically. Before 2021, Japan and Russia played a large role, afterwards the situation had polarized although Japan had joined the U.S. pursuit of a strong agenda. In the earlier period, trade took center stage, but that shifted to economic security as part of a more comprehensive approach to regional reorganization. Finally, military tensions abruptly emerged as a central focus of rival strategies, unlike the earlier situation.

The United States had responded to Xi Jinping's initiatives of the 2010s cautiously but without real alarm. The SCO started as an anti-terrorist grouping that moderated Sino-Russian tensions in Central Asia. The BRI prioritized infrastructure projects sought by countries trading heavily with China. Despite many worrisome elements, the U.S. largely limited itself to staying aloof. Its aims were mostly minimal and defensive, leaving space for its allies to explore their own goals.

In the two terms of Barak Obama, Chinese, however, railed against his "pivot to Asia" as if it would turn into a gamechanger blocking their regional plans, and in Donald Trump's presidential term, they castigated the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) plan as threatening a region-wide containment strategy, but in both cases, there was confident pushback that these initiatives were doomed. What stands apart in China's response to Joe Biden's Quad, IPEF, etc. is the more defensive nature of its reactions, struggling to identify a positive outcome. The world situation has changed, leaving China more on its backfoot as its image keeps being tarnished by domestic troubles and spillover from the war in Ukraine. Biden's policies, including new steps to counter China in the Indo-Pacific, also play a big part in leaving Chinese bewildered on how to regain the momentum for their own regional agenda. Comparing the two sides' regional reordering agendas shows the initiative had shifted to the U.S. by 2022 as the Ukraine war reverberated.

Looking back to the 2010s, we see China gaining ground in shaping regional architecture. Some moves by Obama and Trump sought to counter China's advances, but the momentum was with China. In contrast, in 2021-23, the U.S. has realized a string of successes. They reflect positive policy choices as well as China's increasingly negative image. Ironically, the Ukraine war, seen by some as likely to distract the U.S. from the Indo-Pacific, actually accelerated its commitment.

What distinguishes the U.S. strategy of 2023 from earlier U.S. strategies is the overwhelming emphasis on technologies of the present and the future. Export controls, investment limits on incoming and outgoing capital flows, multilateral

coordination, and anticipation of the cutting-edge technologies of the next generation are prioritized. Unlike Obama's preoccupation with freedom of navigation operations or Trump's with trade deficits, Biden put semi-conductors in the forefront, following his leadership of a broad coalition that imposed sanctions on Russia for its war in Ukraine with a sustained roll-out and buy-in from others on restrictions on dual-use products. As of early 2023, the degree of buy-in and the extent of the restrictions were unclear. Yet, the sweeping nature of the U.S. agenda was conspicuous as was China's strong resistance.

Strategies for Regionalism

As in the 1930s, the retreat from globalization based on "free trade" is reviving bloc economies. In a context of deepening security tensions, like-minded regional partners are deemed more reliable for supply chain security. Unlike the run-up to WWII, however, globalization and China's central role in it make decoupling next to impossible. Rather than assume two autonomous blocs, many are striving to find the right balance between benefits from globalization and economic security, desperately seeking to limit the thrust of today's separate regional initiatives for decoupling.²

Triangularity reigned supreme in the 2010s. Moscow insisted that multipolarity was the new configuration, as it pointed to the Grand Strategic Triangle of China-Russia-the U.S. and to the Eurasian triangle of China-Russia-India. Tokyo and Seoul did not acknowledge triangularity in light of their close alliances with Washington but operated as if they could maneuver within a triangular setting with China or Russia.³ Yet, the Sino-Russian axis was tightening, the Trump administration's trade war with China boosted bipolarity, and the Biden administration saw the long game with China as requiring allies and partners to join together more closely in order to resist an advancing threat. Even before the Ukraine war in 2022, Tokyo and Seoul were tilting further to the U.S., and in the war's first year Tokyo gave its fulsome support as Seoul edged further in that direction.⁴ Meanwhile, Washington and Beijing were bolstering their regional strategies in opposition to each other, demonstrating how bipolarity plays in the Indo-Pacific.

Superpowers expect hub-and-spokes bipolarity. When the United States savored its unipolar moment in the 1990s into the 2000s, it pursued something more, but as triangularity veered toward wedge-driving to undermine U.S. alliances or exclude the U.S., it was pushed to steer the world to bipolarity. In the 2010s that became apparent, and in the tumultuous year of 2022, the U.S. agenda for forging a coalition against a rival bloc took the spotlight. In the case

of China, biding its time in the 1990s-2000s, approval for multipolarity served to broaden its appeal, but, in the 2010s, its quest for solidarity against the U.S.-led camp grew more conspicuous. Also, by 2022, the Chinese agenda for a Sinocentric order had come into clearer view. Central to the rival U.S. and Chinese strategies for a bipolar order is the Indo-Pacific region, where Beijing is pressing for a multi-dimensional BRI while Washington counters with FOIP and IPEF, each approach acknowledging the increasingly paramount significance of economic security.

The fundamental source of bipolarity is China's assertive foreign policy. It left the aspirations of Russia for multipolarity in Asia unrealizable, while driving Japan and South Korea closer to the United States. India also turned closer to the U.S., but it used the Ukraine war to reaffirm in ties to Russia its wariness of bipolarity.⁵ Disappointed with China's complicating of triangularity with India and ASEAN, Russia desperately invaded Ukraine in its gambit to revive multipolarity. Such moves to brook the tide of bipolarity did not distract the U.S. and China from their overall goals.

Both Washington and Beijing target the Indo-Pacific, in one name or another, as the arena of primary importance in the twenty-first century. Each has come to take a wholistic view of the region, relegating parts therein to sub-regional status, and accepting the long-term challenge of winning support, developing desired infrastructure, and building capacity. They seek to reach agreement on the nature of the desired order, for the U.S., a rules-based order that is secure from coercion and prosperous without undue economic vulnerability. Neither power argues that its strategy is focused on the other; instead, they call it a regional strategy with understood implications for the other power's role, defining that after solidifying ties to allies and partners. Values affirm bipolar perceptions of regionalism: for the U.S. democracy and freedom versus authoritarianism and attacks on a rule-based order; for China rallying vs. "Cold War" mentality. After long demonizing Japan's efforts at regionalism, China refocused on a new, joint challenge. Increasingly, the mutual attacks grew more acerbic, as expressed by members of the House Select Committee on China and the speeches at the National People's Congress in March 2023.⁶

U.S. Strategy for the Indo-Pacific

Overall, leadership change in 2021-22 accelerated the shift to bipolarity already under way. Biden prioritized limiting the threat from China and then was obliged to rally the world behind the defense of Ukraine against Russian aggression. He pressed allies to stand together, ending dalliances with China and Russia.

Kishida Fumio came from a less ideological wing of the LDP and did not feel the same compulsion as Abe Shinzo to strive for autonomous Asian diplomacy. He agreed to bipolarity, accepting that Europe and the Indo-Pacific are interrelated theaters with a common front against aggression. Yoon Suk-yeol had to make a sharp turnabout from Moon Jae-in's agenda, despite serious domestic opposition and Chinese pressure. By 2023 the voices behind a unified regional strategy of the three allies were resounding clearly in China.

The U.S. is determined to prevent China from gaining regional hegemony, obliging the states of the Indo-Pacific to forego security ties that could check China's coercive behavior, and ensuring that economic dependence on China would require disregard for their own economic security and deference to China on all matters of national identity. Washington is resisting Sinocentric strategies that lead to a hub-and-spokes regional architecture. It regards the incorporation of Taiwan by coercion and the demands for Chinese sovereignty over the South China Sea as signs of one-sided control over the sea lanes, which would leave other countries under great duress. It also strives to prevent both Chinese monopolies to be used for economic coercion and access to technologies that would advance China's military and security forces, putting others at risk.

Advancing IPEF and hosting APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation), the U.S. in 2023 pursues dual goals. IPEF is protective of the international order, drawing on a latticework of flexible partnerships to move beyond shared goals to concrete action without forcing states to choose sides. The U.S. sees itself as a status quo power protective of peace and stability, threatened by China and Russia. A Taiwan contingency would echo the disruptive impact of the Ukraine war. It is the prime danger spot. In contrast, APEC is inclusive of China, is reviving after a lull and offers an opportunity to test China's commitment to international norms. It may be a prime opportunity.

U.S. regional strategy has changed because China's behavior has changed, not because a fearful U.S. has responded to an economic competitor. In the 2000s, China was already a serious rival of the U.S. in reshaping regional architecture and pressuring U.S. allies, but it was proceeding mostly within the bounds of acceptable competition. It was cooperating in the Six-Party Talks despite differences in strategy. It accepted ASEAN centrality while pressuring Southeast Asian states. An accommodation was reached against Taiwan pursuing de jure independence, even as the PRC and U.S. remained at odds over how to resolve the Taiwan issue. Toward the end of the decade, it was China which turned aggressive on multiple fronts in the Indo-Pacific, and under

Xi Jinping this transformation accelerated. The U.S. regards itself as a reactive power, urged by allies and partners in the region to stand up to Chinese aggressive behavior, as Biden is doing.

In 2022-23, the U.S. strategy toward the Indo-Pacific region takes four forms: 1) mini-lateral coalitions across the region; 2) traditional security deterrence to prepare for contingencies with tightened ties to other states; 3) value contrasts to expose the gap with China and the danger of its values for regional peace and stability; and 4) economic security steps to contain China's coercion, not a competitor's rise, preventing illicit civil-military fusion and its monopolies over technologies and supplies that could be employed to coerce other states to do China's bidding. The U.S. approach is three-fold: 1) security takes precedence, boosting alliances and pursuing the Quad with the understanding that India's alarm about Chinese aggression opens the door to a security grouping; 2) economics matter, but trade takes a back seat to economic security, as IPEF gradually is clarified; and 3) values receive attention, showcased in two iterations of the Summit for Democracy, although some partners hesitate to echo this U.S. position in light of resistance in the "Global South." The Ukraine war further raised the priority on security, made the case for economic security much stronger, and reinforced the democracy-autocracy divide. The U.S.-led agenda stressed a free and open order based on the rule of law, sovereignty and territorial integrity, prohibition against the use of force, and peaceful resolution of disputes. The Ukraine war and China's response have led the U.S. to redouble its agenda to forestall any Chinese coercion. China's verbal support for the logic of Russia's invasion of Ukraine has drawn attention to the parallel with potential Chinese coercion against Taiwan. Allied dependence on the Russian economy has awakened countries to their economic vulnerability to China. A lack of preparedness for war in Europe could be duplicated in Asia. Without a NATO or EU in Asia, the U.S. has accelerated its pursuit of a robust regional framework to prepare for Chinese actions.

Whereas China's primary partner is Russia, the two have struggled to agree on a joint regional strategy, and China generally proceeds with little regard to Russia's thinking. In contrast, vital to U.S. success in the Indo-Pacific has been coordination with Japan, which saw clear convergence of thinking by 2023. If Russia in 2022 by its war in Ukraine greatly damaged its own standing, it also negatively impacted China's standing in the Indo-Pacific, creating the image that "today's Ukraine is tomorrow's Taiwan" and that the Russian disrespect for sovereignty and territorial integrity was China's attitude too. This message and Russia's war proved to be the capstone in eroding decades of China's claim that it championed these two principles. To China's great disadvantage, abruptly, the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific theater became inseparably linked.

Comparing 2023 and 2020, I find seven arenas where the U.S. position in the Indo-Pacific has strengthened dramatically. The fulsome embrace with Japan, strikingly clarified in December Japanese strategic white papers and in Kishida's January 2023 summit with Biden highlighted by his announced defense budget increase to 2 percent of GDP, is a huge victory for the U.S. side as well as a defeat for China. A second major win came with Yoon Suk-yeol's announced resolution of the forced labor issue in March 2023 coupled with his strong support for security trilateralism with Japan and the United States.⁷ China had long warned South Korea against military linkages to Japan, as demonstrated in the "three no's" promises it secured from Moon Jae-in in 2017. A third achievement was realized in the June 2022 Madrid NATO summit, welcoming the AP4 (Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand) and inserting NATO into Indo-Pacific security in unprecedented ways, as Great Britain took the lead in pursuing closer ties in the region.

Separate attention is warranted for a fourth transformation in the early 2020s of considerable consequence for the Indo-Pacific region. The Ukraine war proved to be a wake-up call for many concerned about Chinese coercion against Taiwan but undecided on how to prepare. One issue supersedes all others for Tokyo. An expected Chinese attack on Taiwan is foremost in the minds of Japanese. The subject of a "Taiwan contingency" suddenly rose to the forefront. If earlier there was some prospect that China might be dissuaded or that a wedge between China and Russia could be helpful, bipolarity is viewed as the reality now. Since Japan depends on the U.S. will to act, both to prevent an attack and to respond to it, U.S. determination in the face of the aggression by Russia was reassuring, while Ukraine's will to fight showed that Japan needed the same willpower to elicit outside support in a conflict extending beyond Taiwan into Okinawa. In 2022 Biden more clearly expressed willingness to defend Taiwan, and the turnabout in security policy in the Philippines under a new president hinted at new U.S. basing rights in the vicinity.

Further to the south, the combination of the Quad and AUKUS served U.S. interests as well. In this fifth arena, India is critical, and its position toward China changed fundamentally in 2020. Yet, its refusal to sanction or strongly oppose Russia over the Ukraine war revealed the still powerful hold of "strategic autonomy." On the whole, at the regional level, a win for Biden. If the U.S. continues to have difficulty overcoming "neutrality" in the "Global South," crowning India's as its leader at least counters China's claim to be galvanizing this area into its camp.

In two other arenas the Ukraine war sharpened what had been an evolving tendency under Biden: economic security and values. Supply chain vulnerability, civil-military dual use advanced technology, and investments in China and by

Chinese to gain access to critical technology all drew intense scrutiny. China's economic clout—often used to pressure other states—suffered a huge setback. IPEF became the vehicle for institutionalizing the restrictions imposed on China in the wake of tough economic sanctions on Russia in 2022. Moreover, the image of an autocrat going to war with no checks and balances was extrapolated from Putin to Xi Jinping, whose full control over China's politics was laid bare for all to see at the 20th Party Congress in late 2022.

The Party Congress was the second development after the Ukraine war that reinforced the U.S. effort to forge a latticework of networks behind its emerging Indo-Pacific strategy. Coming against the background of military bravado in the Taiwan Strait in August and the collapse of Xi's signature "Zero-COVID" policy in December, the congress witnessed a single leader oust all colleagues who stood in the way of his unchecked exercise of power and convey an image of impatience, arrogance, and risk-taking. Although Indo-Pacific states remained wary of economic retaliation for defying China, they increasingly conveyed their eagerness for the U.S. to boost its presence, backing parts, if not the whole, of the emerging U.S. regional strategy. China's push along with the Biden administration's pull enabled the unparalleled, recent U.S. success in Asia.

No event crystallized the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy more clearly than the Hiroshima G7 summit of May 2023. To Biden's satisfaction, it showcased alliance solidarity: led by Japan, connecting the Euro-Atlantic mobilization against the Ukraine war with the Indo-Pacific alarm about China's assault on pillars of the international order, tacking on a Quad summit in place of Biden's intent to go to Australia for that event before he had to rush home to deal with a deadline to pay U.S. debt, and reinforcing all of the elements of U.S. regional military or economic security strategy. If the "Global South," represented by states such as India, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Brazil, failed to be persuaded on sanctions against Russia or, in most cases, China policy, this was a key step to engaging with it, while China's unrestrained anger proved that it was feeling beleaguered.⁸

China's Strategy for the Indo-Pacific

On January 20, 2023 Foreign Minister Qin Gang described the BRI as a "global enterprise to build a belt of prosperity and a road to happiness." Southeast Asia, notably Indonesia, serves as the centerpiece, whose commitment to the BRI remains solid despite public caution.⁹ China takes pride in such assessments, which expose gaps in the U.S. regional strategy, short on funds for infrastructure and on trade deals. Indeed, regionalization of Southeast Asia is treated as a key mechanism to serve China's aims, feigning backing for ASEAN leadership,¹⁰ not Sinocentrism.

Chinese sources indicate a turning point from the BRI advancing well and driving regionalism with little resistance, to China being put on the defensive and needing to change its strategy or adopt a regional strategy, since authors suggest there is none for the Indo-Pacific. Having long criticized Obama for seeking through his “pivot to Asia” to contain China, it grew more positive about his approach, as if he had prioritized working together in multilateral settings rather than excluding China. Similarly, Japan’s FOIP approach looked better in retrospect in Biden’s time.

In the 2010s China was competing against Japan-led regionalism as well as U.S.-Japan joint plans. Economics had a more central role for Japan, contrasting high-quality and transparent projects to China’s. Ideology was pursued more subtly, even toning down the idea of a strategy to just an initiative and then a vision. States were wary of choosing sides, and Japan softened the image of competition as it raised issues of geo-economics over geostrategic competition. If China eventually sought common ground with Japan on trade and investment, the other side of Japan’s regional approach, enlisting the U.S. proved anathema to a burgeoning regional agenda.

Much is written in China about Japan’s leading role in advocating for an Indo-Pacific strategy. Attention focuses on maritime security, values, and economic competition in the quest for a multilateral framework. Noting significant shifts over the past few years, authors call for new Chinese countermeasures. They note that this strategy is more Japanese than American in origin and has evolved over many years.¹¹ Even as Abe was cooperating with Xi Jinping on BRI, has he pursued the FOIP; Chinese saw him eyeing an historic return to “great power” status and leadership of Asia. TPP and Indo-Pacific strategy were considered means to this larger end. As the U.S. weakened and had to retreat in Asia, Japan would replace it, using new multilateral groupings. Stress is put on values, representative of Japan’s conservatives, not only close to Western views of democracy, open trade, and freedom, but distinctive in thinking on history, as on India. The prime geographical focus is Southeast Asia and India, where rivalry with BRI is planned. Abe emphasized high quality, regarded as a way to compete with China. In Southeast Asia there is trust in Japanese companies’ investments, building on positive accomplishments since the postwar era. Japan uses U.S. ties in Southeast Asia. Steps toward institutionalization have quickened, including the Quad and triangularity with Australia, as well as with the U.S. It is such warnings about Japan standing in China’s way that clarified unbridled regional intentions.

In 2020, Shi Yinhong and colleagues emphasized the importance of stabilizing Sino-Japanese relations against the backdrop of worsening Sino-U.S. relations, taking seizing the pandemic as an opportunity to deepen economic cooperation, support which the Suga administration will appreciate. High-level meetings and summitry would drive these ties forward, including Xi's promised state visit when conditions permit. Differences in U.S. and Japanese strategy and attention also leave an opening, e.g., on responding to the South China Sea conflict, the East China Sea problem, and the Taiwan problem. Preparations are needed to keep illusions from taking root in Japan and to preserve the foundation of Sino-Japanese relations. No doubt is left that China's ties to Japan could bypass a possible U.S. regional strategy in this 2020 appeal.¹²

As late as 2020, Chinese were still targeting Japan as the leader in pursuing a regional strategy to counter China's with the FOIP as an exclusive zone with security in the forefront, while interfering with China's economic ties. The BRI began in 2013, and the FOIP started with Abe's proposal in 2016 before Trump tried to take charge. Japan in 2017 to 2020 sought to bridge the gap, utilizing Nikai Toshiro as the "pipe" in favor of joint infrastructure projects in Southeast Asia. Largely on the basis of support for the BRI, under conditions of high-quality proposals and transparency, Japan reassured China of a "new era" in bilateral relations. Why did Japan pull away in 2021? Chinese attribute it to U.S. pressure, obscuring their responsibility. Biden pressed for a "battle of systems" with politics, human rights, and ideology involved. After Suga replaced Abe, Japan also made human rights and the Taiwan question matters for pressuring China. Thus, Japan's FOIP went through stages, first to draw the U.S. into it, then under Trump pulling back by not calling it a strategy and seeking cooperation with China, and finally, following Biden's direction losing any autonomous thrust. Putting new pressure on China, the U.S. sought to reduce its technological advance. China shifted too, taking a more confrontational view of bilateral relations with Japan.¹³ Having failed to waylay Japan's regional moves, as a way to shortcut a feared U.S. regional agenda, China turned sharply against Japan as well as responded to Biden with unprecedented fervor.

If Japan was depicted as seeking leadership, limiting both China and the United States in the Indo-Pacific, it was also seen as not wanting a strategic showdown with China. Yet, mutually exclusive geopolitical strategies, trade and technology competition, and ideological differences intensified, making it less willing to rely on Chinese supply chains and more wary of the BRI. China's main concerns were that Japan would strengthen geo-economic competitiveness, further

deepen mini-lateral frameworks, and further expand the geographical scope of the “Indo-Pacific.” The clearest direct impact would be on investment in China’s BRI projects because the two countries’ companies are competing to invest in infrastructure projects and for supply chains and market share. Debating how China should respond, one author took a positive approach: developing its own “two-ocean” Indo-Pacific strategy, building on advantages as an “economically attractive power,” and increasing the competitiveness of its companies so that it could compete for infrastructure projects, and promote positive cultural exchanges to strengthen China’s regional image.¹⁴ No longer able to drive a wedge between Japan and the U.S., China was shifting to targeting Japan before 2022.

In late 2022, one article urged Biden to discard the “Indo-Pacific” and reembrace the “Asia-Pacific” concept since Asia-Pacific conveys more connotations of economic cooperation, while Indo-Pacific is more geopolitical with alliances as the focus. Obama’s “rebalance to the Asia-Pacific” and TPP appeared constructive to many, the article adds, contradicting long-expressed views in China. The use of “free and open” with Indo-Pacific proves that it is really about Quad security talks, military exercises, and relations with China. It is nakedly confrontational, fragmenting the region with an anti-China alliance, rejected by most states. India is mainly responding to the Sino-Indian border tensions, not enlisting with the U.S. The article calls on the U.S. to abandon this failed strategy,¹⁵ as if the term “Indo-Pacific” connotes containment rather than countering China’s assertive agenda.

Viewed bilaterally, China’s relations had deteriorated in succession with Australia, the United States, India, Japan, and South Korea without any claim of a breakthrough improvement apart from Russia, in some renderings. Pictured as triangles with the U.S., the situation is even starker: the Sino-U.S.-Japan triangle nosedived for China by 2021; the Sino-U.S.-ROK triangle had left China deeply concerned by 2022; and the Sino-U.S.-Russia triangle, despite its superficial shift in China’s direction, left it much worse off after the onset of the Ukraine war, not because Moscow was less dependent on Beijing, but because it had now been severely weakened.¹⁶

In multiple areas, Chinese sources recognize deterioration in China’s position. In writings on Japan and South Korea the change in tone is unmistakable, acknowledging the loss of further possibilities to drive a firm wedge between them and the U.S. as well as the negative impact of trilateralism. The link-up of NATO and U.S. alliances in the Indo-Pacific is recognized as a serious blow. Resoluteness

to counter a contingency over Taiwan is worrisome to China as well. The Indo-Pacific concept, the Quad, and economic security all appear as challenges for the Chinese authors. Even Biden's ideological language is recognized as more threatening than Trump's use of anti-communism. Chinese sources confirm the image of U.S. successes and the need for new responses by China, naturally deflecting blame from China or Russia for these outcomes.¹⁷

Chinese sources recognize the effectiveness of Biden's approach,¹⁸ i.e., that in a comprehensive, competitive strategy, mini-lateral cooperation mechanisms play a key role. They undermine more inclusive regional multilateral economic mechanisms sought by China, or intensify geoeconomics, particularly in areas such as infrastructure and technology, while cutting China out of some supply chains. If internal differences among members of the mini-lateral mechanisms will eventually limit their development (India, for example, has a long-standing foreign policy of seeking to balance among great powers and South Korea has important economic and political relations with China which it will not want to damage), Chinese recognize ongoing consequences in economic security.

Chinese acknowledge a worse security environment in the Indo-Pacific than a few years earlier, but they refuse to draw a linkage with the Ukraine war or fully credit the Biden administration's successful strategy. They also cannot fault Chinese policy for any negative outcome. In addition, they are obliged to obfuscate China's strategy, feigning the absence of an agenda to transform the region apart from encouraging trade, opposing alliances, and seeking only positive relations based on mutual respect and acceptance of China's core interests. Thus, the things that matter most for deciphering China's regional strategy are left unclear in its writings. Yet, we can piece together a strategy from policy choices and criticisms of the policies of others. Notably, the U.S.

Chinese analysis of Biden's Indo-Pacific policy reveals thinking about China's own strategy. Biden is accused of interfering with the "integration" and "unification" of the region and China's pursuit of a "common destiny." It is fragmenting the region, splitting ASEAN, and stirring up anxiety about a "China threat." Missing is any assessment of what China has done to enable these results. Absent too are accusations that the U.S. is doing what Russia accuses it of doing in Europe, squeezing the lifeblood of a society, which requires it to resort to extreme measures to save its sovereignty. In the case of China, the battlefield, at least to 2023, has been mostly economic, rather than military.

China's strategy in response to Biden's initiatives centers on six targets: 1) fine-tuning the BRI at a planned 2023 third summit; 2) solidifying and expanding the SCO, which was complicated by a September 2022 summit, where the Russian war was on people's minds; 3) driving wedges between the U.S. and its allies, which many Chinese articles to 2022 urged to do more actively; 4) targeting Taiwan with a mixture of misinformation about the U.S. and threats; 5) going to Europe with economic appeals but no answer to the image of China on Russia's side; and 6) appealing for regional economic integration linked to ASEAN solidarity.¹⁹ None of these moves was succeeding, but a new approach may be emerging at the beginning of 2023, signaled by the claim that China was offering a peace plan for the Ukraine war and redoubling on its GSI. The U.S. side had awakened to a menacing expansion of power backed by a zero-sum mentality.²⁰

Chinese perceptions of Biden's "comprehensive strategy" embodied in the Indo-Pacific concept are zero-sum, more than Japan's prior advocacy of the FOIP. Now the strategy covers security, economics, technology, and ideological stressing shared values of "freedom" and "openness." The core is maritime security, next is the values framework, third is economic and technological competition, and fourth is a network of multilateral mechanisms. Abe is faulted for advancing a security-oriented Indo-Pacific with values showcased too, but it was only after Trump in 2017 reconceptualized the "Indo-Pacific" that Abe is seen as starting to endorse the more assertive U.S. approach. The Biden approach is comprehensive, putting China more on the defensive.

Economic security emerged in 2022 as the focus of Sino-U.S. competition. China's use of economic vulnerability, as with South Korea in 2016 following its decision to deploy THAAD, brought this to the fore. The pandemic led to supply chain disruptions and heightened fear of undue dependency. When Biden met Xi Jinping in Bali in November 2022, tensions over economic security ranked with the Ukraine war and Taiwan as key concerns. Xi charged that the U.S. was breaking international trade rules and weaponizing trade and technology after the U.S. had imposed tight export controls on dual-use commodities. Looking back to Xi's diplomacy in Southeast Asia that month, Yomiuri saw economic security as the main emphasis. Opposed to decoupling in advanced technology, Xi appealed to countries to not harmonize policies with the U.S. and to keep supply chains open. At the APEC summit he called what the U.S. was doing a blow to international supply networks. Xi especially revealed a growing sense of crisis over tightened restrictions on semiconductors.²¹

On what basis is a degree of optimism aired? National identity arguments supplant security ones: the U.S. is too ideological to be trusted by others; Japan's quest for autonomy in Asia is too entrenched for it to follow the U.S. closely; South Koreans are too divided over identity to swing sharply to the U.S. side;²² India's "strategic autonomy" promises to keep the U.S. at bay. There is mention of national economic interests that favor China over the United States. Key to optimism is the argument that states do not want to damage economic ties to China due to security and that linkages between mini-lateral entities are in doubt, ASEAN states cannot accept a weakening of ASEAN centrality or opposition to China, QUAD+ expansion is unlikely, and states do not want to be dragged into great power competition, which the U.S. is doing.²³ Yet, such strands of optimism are more muted in the trying circumstances now being faced.

Chinese sources recognize the instability and uncertain continuity in the IPEF framework, given the decision not to seek congressional ratification and the absence of tariff reductions and market access appealing to other states, especially in Southeast Asia. Labor and environmental demands pose problems without countervailing trade enticements. The U.S. seeks to solidify its own competitiveness and economic leadership, but the economic interests of other states are not in accord. Integration of the region would be sacrificed, one reads. States are unwilling to become pawns of the U.S. regional strategy. Yet, Chinese acknowledge a challenge to China's regional economic influence, raise the issue of "de-sinification," and call for policies to boost its competitiveness. Already Asia lacks an effective regional instrument. States are increasingly pressed between China and the U.S. to pick a side, fragmenting the region. China needs to respond positively with cool self-confidence, put its own house in order and deepen integration with its huge market the main attraction, what is most missing in the world today.²⁴ This call for a positive response defies the increasingly strident tone in 2023 to tackle the U.S. head-on.

New Chinese documents—the *Concept Paper on the Global Security Initiative* (GSI) and *PRC Position on a Political Solution to the Ukraine Crisis*—in the late winter of 2023 pointed to a more assertive response to the Biden agenda. The GSI was first proposed by Xi in April 2022. How do these documents reflect Chinese thinking about the Indo-Pacific region? They both demonize the United States for not respecting the sovereignty of countries, turning the U.S. criticism of Russia and China on its head. If the U.S. security argument targeted to Southeast Asia is China's failure to respect their territorial integrity, Chinese are making the opposite case. The documents blame "Cold War mentality" for

U.S. measures to resist China, insisting that without U.S. intervention from afar the natural order in the region would proceed.²⁵ Sanctions and supply chain security are identified as distorting free economic exchange, not the danger of becoming vulnerable to pressure or civil-military fusion from China or Russia. The U.S. stands accused of demonizing China, not the other way around. China is taking a newly active role in forging its own security order, it seems, after long concentrating on forging an economic order.

With the U.S. and its allies far away and Russia having lost clout and trust, China in May 2023 applied its strategy to Central Asia of regional economic integration leading to greater political and military influence.²⁶ Feigning closer cooperation with Russia, it chose the lowest hanging fruit, knowing that Moscow was in no position to register its previous objections. Handicapped elsewhere by the U.S.-led regional strategy, Xi Jinping found an opening he was able to seize.

Conclusion

The momentum shift in the early 2020s to the U.S. side over China reflected the inherent edge of a broad-based alliance network over a narrowly Sinocentric adversary as well as the success of the Biden administration's rejuvenation of U.S. strategic leadership with many new touches focused on economic security. Biden galvanized the considerable assets of Northeast Asia to launch a more comprehensive agenda for Asia's southern tier, recognizing the significance of Taiwan as a vital link between the two. In 2023 Xi Jinping was preparing a counterstrategy.

In 2012 China targeted Japan above all, from 2018 there was little doubt that the U.S. had risen to be the prime target, and in 2023 demonization of South Korea topped China's list. Chinese anger at U.S. Indo-Pacific policy and alliances kept mounting, as the U.S. found more success in expanding its strategy to allies and putting pressure on China. The Ukraine war served as the most striking catalyst in bringing the two clashing strategies to the forefront.

Chinese argue that two historically-based ignominious ambitions drive regionalism against their country: 1) U.S. Cold War mentality to contain a rival, as occurred in the Korean War and anti-Soviet policies; and 2) Japan's prewar mentality to become the dominant power in Asia, which is carrying over to remilitarization. Omitted is any recognition of the backlash against China's

expansionist and threatening behavior, leading countries predisposed to cooperate with it to join in resistance. The Quad was born not from a compulsion to contain but from defensive ties.

China's BRI and other regional plans aroused anxiety among many of its neighbors, who rallied behind a U.S. led approach to limit the potential of Chinese coercion. As BRI shifted in the face of economic doubts and recipient wariness, China lost momentum for reshaping regional architecture. After halting countermoves by Obama and Trump, Biden crystallized a more comprehensive response centered on mini-lateral security groups and economic security restrictions, coupled with appeals for shared values. Although incomplete in specifics, the Biden plan capitalized on the Ukraine war and the prospect of China's forceful takeover of Taiwan to forge a sustainable strategy to keep China from turning economic vulnerability in other states into regional control. Contestation over the Indo-Pacific was overshadowed by Russia's war in Europe, but neither the U.S. nor China lost focus on primacy of their rivalry over regionalism.

Endnotes

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- ¹⁴ Qiao Liang, “盟伴体系、复合阵营与美国“印太战略,” *Dongbeiyi Luntan*, no. 4 (2022).
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- ¹⁶ Gilbert Rozman, "20 Ways China Is Losing the Ukraine War," *The Asan Forum*, May 23, 2022, <https://theasanforum.org/20-ways-china-is-losing-the-ukraine-war/>.
- ¹⁷ For this article, I have reviewed articles in *Xiandai Guoji Guanxi*, *Guoji Anquan Yanjiu*, *Guoji Wenti Yanjiu*, *Shjie Jingji yu Zhengzhi*, *Dongbeiyi Luntan*, *Huanqiu Shibao*, *Riben Xuekan*, and other sources. Specific citations follow below. For more on the Chinese sources, see the bi-monthly, "Country Report: China" in *The Asan Forum*, which is usually prepared by Danielle Cohen, although I have written it at times.
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