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The Biden Administration's Indo-Pacific Strategy and its Impacts on Asia-Pacific Order*

Zongyou Wei

Center for American Studies, Fudan University

Shanghai 200437, P. R. China

wzy82cn@163.com

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Abstract

The Biden administration regards the Indo-Pacific region as the pivot of U.S. global strategy, and China as the primary strategic challenge in the Indo-Pacific region and even the globe. It has implemented forward diplomacy and forward military deployment and promoted Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, attempting to involve allies inside and outside the region in an all-round competition against China and maintain U.S. regional hegemony. Despite the challenges in implementing the Indo-Pacific Strategy, such as U.S. global strategic balance, funding shortage, difficulty in coordinating the allies, and inconsistency of domestic and foreign policy, the Biden administration will continue to promote related policy initiatives, which have and will continue to affect the political, economic, and security order in the Asia-Pacific region and impede the healthy and stable development of U.S.–China relations.

Keywords

U.S.–China relations; the Biden administration; Indo-Pacific strategy; Asia-Pacific order.

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1. Introduction

After taking office, the Biden administration sanitized his predecessor's domestic and foreign affairs, trying to eradicate Trump's political legacy and influence. However, in terms of the Indo-Pacific Strategy, Biden has maintained Trump's notion of "a free and open Indo-Pacific", and shares similar strategic perceptions of China and the objectives of the Indo-Pacific Strategy. That said, the Biden administration differs significantly from its predecessor in its foreign policy philosophy, and the policies and objectives of its Indo-Pacific Strategy have demonstrated new trends that exert profound influence on the regional order.

2. Objectives of the Biden Administration's Indo-Pacific Strategy

Early in the 1990s, the Clinton Administration's East Asia Pacific Security Strategy report noted, "since World War II, the United States has been a dominant power in the Asia-Pacific region". Maintaining the U.S. dominance and preventing the emergence of any hegemony or hegemonic bloc has been an unwavering objective of the country's Asia-Pacific strategy (U.S. Department of Defense, 1995). A report published by the RAND Corporation in 2001 noted, "the potential emergence of a peer competitor is probably the most important long-term planning challenge for the Department of Defense" (Szayna *et al.*, 2001, p. xi). A report by the U.S. Congressional Research Service noted that in the past decades, U.S. policymakers "have chosen to pursue, as a key element of U.S. national strategy, a goal of preventing the emergence of a regional hegemon in one part of Eurasia or another" (Congressional Research Service, 2022b, p. 5).

After Obama took office, with the rapid rise of China and its increasing influence in the Asia-Pacific region, the U.S. strategic concerns about China were deepened. In 2011, the Obama administration proposed the "Pivot to Asia" strategy, which aimed to increase diplomatic and military investment in the Asia-Pacific region to compete with China and maintain U.S. dominance in the region. The Trump administration, which defined China as a "strategic competitor", advocated the return of the era of great power competition and proposed the strategy of building a "free and open Indo-Pacific", aiming to maintain the U.S. regional influence and compete with China in a vast area stretching from the Western Pacific to the western coast of India.

The Biden administration, which also regarded China as a "strategic competitor", emphasized the need to cooperate with its global and Indo-Pacific allies and partners to compete with China in the Indo-Pacific region. In the Interim National Security Strategy Guide, released in March 2021, the Biden administration noted that the world power distribution is changing with the emergence of "new threats", and warned that China "is the only competitor potentially capable of combining its

economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to mount a sustained challenge to a stable and open international system” (The White House, 2021b, p. 8). In April, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence released its 2021 Annual Threat Assessment, which noted, “China increasingly is a near-peer competitor, challenging the United States in multiple arenas — especially economically, militarily, and technologically — and is pushing to change global norms” (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2021, p. 4).

In February 2022, the Biden Administration released the Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States, which provides a more comprehensive account of U.S. strategic interests, strategic objectives, and lines of effort in the Indo-Pacific region. The report emphasizes that the United States is an “Indo-Pacific power” and that the Indo-Pacific region is vital to U.S. security and prosperity. It claimed the ties between the U.S. and the region “were forged two centuries ago”, and that the U.S., while seeking extensive commercial interest in the region, also has security commitments to its allies as well as security and strategic interest in the prevention of a near-peer competitor (The White House, 2022b, pp. 4–5). The report claims, “the Indo-Pacific faces mounting challenges, particularly from the PRC. The PRC is combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological might as it pursues a sphere of influence in the Indo-Pacific and seeks to become the world’s most influential power” (The White House, 2022b, p. 5). The report identifies five strategic objectives for the U.S. in the Indo-Pacific region: to advance a free and open Indo-Pacific; to build connections within and beyond the region; to drive regional prosperity; to bolster Indo-Pacific security; and to build regional resilience to transnational threats (The White House, 2022b, p. 7). It also proposes 10 core lines of effort for achieving these objectives in the next 12 to 24 months.

The five objectives of the Biden Administration’s Indo-Pacific Strategy cover politics, economy, security, regional governance, and alliance relations, among others. Politically, it aims to promote the U.S. vision of order in the Indo-Pacific region, especially the values and governance concepts of American democracy under the banner of “liberty and democracy” to counter the threat of China’s “authoritarianism”. Meanwhile, it also aims to ensure that the U.S. can access to the region’s land, sea, air, space, and cyber domains. Economically, through initiatives such as the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, it intends to safeguard its economic interests in the Indo-Pacific region and hedge against the impact of China’s Belt and Road Initiative. Militarily, through initiatives such as “integrated deterrence”, it seeks to strengthen its military presence in the Indo-Pacific region and maintain U.S. military superiority. In terms of regional governance, it aims to enhance the region’s ability to respond to climate change, clean energy, and COVID-19 by increasing investment and cooperation in these areas. In terms of alliance relations, it seeks to further strengthen bilateral military alliances with its

Asia-Pacific allies, build small multilateral alliances on specific issues, enhance U.S. regional leadership, and join forces with allies to address challenges from China.

Apparently, the objectives of the Biden administration's Indo-Pacific Strategy are not fundamentally different from those of his predecessor, as they both aim to safeguard U.S. political, economic, and security interests in the Indo-Pacific region and prevent China from challenging U.S. regional hegemony. However, the Trump administration focused more on military security, emphasizing "America first" and pursuing a unilateralist foreign policy; while the Biden administration focuses more on the interconnectedness of political, economic, security issues, and even regional governance issues, with a particular emphasis on shoring up weak links in the economic field, and emphasizes on working with regional allies to jointly promote the Indo-Pacific Strategy.

3. Implementation of the Biden Administration's Indo-Pacific Strategy

Since 2021, the Biden administration has been promoting its Indo-Pacific Strategy in four major aspects:

First, it has rebuilt relations with U.S. allies. During Trump's presidency, the notion of "America First" and the "transactionalist" stance toward allies caused doubts about the reliability of the U.S. among its Asia-Pacific allies and partners, and their relations were challenged to varying degrees (Wei, 2019, pp. 84–98). The Biden administration believes that in the strategic competition with China, its expansive networks of allies in the Indo-Pacific region and around the world are unique U.S. strategic assets, which must be optimized and made good use of. In his first speech on U.S. foreign policy after assuming the presidency, Biden emphasized, "America's alliances are our greatest asset, and leading with diplomacy means standing shoulder-to-shoulder with our allies and key partners once again" (The White House, 2021e). In early 2021, Kurt Campbell, Coordinator for Indo-Pacific Affairs at the National Security Council (NSC), and Rush Doshi, Director for China Affairs at the NSC, jointly published an article in *Foreign Affairs*, stating that if parity and order are to be restored in Asia, the United States must act "in concert with alliances and partners", while "deepening those relationships in which the United States plays a major role — placing a 'tire' on the familiar regional alliance system with a U.S. hub and allied spokes" (Campbell and Doshi, 2021).

Specifically, the Biden administration is working on four fronts to rebuild the U.S. ally network: first, strengthening traditional U.S. bilateral military alliances in the Indo-Pacific region. After taking office, Biden had several bilateral meetings with his counterparts of Japan, South Korea, and Australia to resolve the disagreements arising from garrison cost sharing and economic and trade issues.

He also sent the Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense, National Security Advisor, and other cabinet members to visit Japan, South Korea, Australia, and the Philippines to highlight the importance the U.S. attaches to traditional military allies, with the aim of repairing the relations with U.S. allies.

Second, upgrading the U.S.–Japan–India–Australia Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) mechanism. The Biden administration attaches great importance to QUAD and proposes to make it a “premier regional grouping” to ensure that it plays its due role in key issues in the Indo-Pacific region ([The White House, 2022b](#), p. 16). In February 2021, shortly after taking office, the Biden administration held a video conference among the U.S., Japanese, Indian, and Australian foreign ministers, announcing that the four foreign ministers would meet once a year and hold regular high-level official meetings and working group talks. At the meeting, the four foreign ministers expressed that it was imperative to strengthen cooperation in the COVID-19 response and climate change and discussed regional counter-terrorism and maritime security ([U.S. Department of State, 2021b](#)). In March, following Biden’s suggestion, QUAD was upgraded to leadership-level talks, and the first video summit of the four leaders was held. At the meeting, the four leaders reaffirmed their commitment to strengthen cooperation to build a “free and open Indo-Pacific”, decided to establish working groups of vaccine expertise, critical and emerging technologies, and climate issues to enhance coordination and cooperation, and reaffirmed their support for the centrality of ASEAN ([The White House, 2021c](#)). In September 2021, the four leaders held their first offline meeting in the U.S., where they stressed the need to further strengthen exchanges and cooperation in the COVID-19 response, vaccine production and access, and COVID-19 vaccine production and distribution, quality infrastructure, climate change response, critical and emerging technologies, 5G and semiconductor chips, cybersecurity, space, science and technology, and humanities to jointly address regional challenges ([The White House, 2021c](#)). In the Indo-Pacific Strategy report, the Biden Administration, for the first time, proposed to “strengthen the role of QUAD as the premier regional grouping” ([The White House, 2022b](#), p. 16). This shows that the Biden administration intends to upgrade QUAD to an important political and strategic platform for the U.S. to promote its Indo-Pacific Strategy.

Third, building the trilateral security partnership with Australia and the United Kingdom (AUKUS). In September 2021, the Biden Administration announced the establishment of AUKUS, which serves to deepen information and technology sharing among the three countries and promote deeper integration of defense technologies, industrial bases, and supply chains. The three countries issued a joint statement supporting Australia’s acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines and drawing on U.S. and British expertise to enable the acquisition as soon as possible. The joint statement also emphasized the need to increase future cooperation in

cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence, quantum technologies, and underwater warfare capabilities ([The White House, 2021f](#)). In November, the U.S., the U.K. and Australia signed the Exchange of Naval Nuclear Propulsion Information Agreement, which allows the U.K. and U.S. to share information related to naval nuclear power technology with Australia to determine the best way for the Australian Navy to acquire nuclear submarines. A team led by James Miller, former U.S. Defense Department official, was established to develop a road map for the trilateral defense cooperation over the next 18 months ([Australian Government Defence, 2021](#)). In December 2021, Biden submitted the agreement to Congress for consideration ([Congressional Research Service, 2022a](#), p. 1). In early April 2022, the three countries announced that they will enhance cooperation on hypersonic and anti-supersonic weapons ([Barnes, 2022](#)). AUKUS is the first new-model defense partnership formed by the United States in peacetime since the end of the Cold War. To this end, the U.S. has gone to great lengths to undermine the agreement on conventional diesel-powered submarines that Australia signed with France, a traditional U.S. ally, to give Australia access to U.S. and UK nuclear-powered submarine technology. This has revealed the Biden administration's strategic intent to make Australia, located in the South Pacific, play a greater role in keeping China in check. A U.S. Congressman said, "AUKUS is a critical new partnership that should be at the forefront of our security architecture in the Indo-Pacific" ([Tomazin, 2022](#)).

Fourth, strengthening the partnership with ASEAN. Determined to change the Trump administration's neglect toward ASEAN, the Biden administration has increased its diplomatic efforts to demonstrate the importance it places on ASEAN and the U.S. presence in the region. Biden virtually attended the East Asia Summit and the U.S.–ASEAN Summit, and hosted a special U.S.–ASEAN Summit in Washington, D.C., in May 2022. At the U.S.–ASEAN Summit, Biden emphasized that the United States supports the centrality of ASEAN and will strengthen cooperation with ASEAN in the COVID-19 response, economic and trade connectivity, maritime security, humanities exchanges, and climate change, pledging to provide \$150 million in aid funding to ASEAN to advance the cooperation mentioned above ([The White House, 2022a](#)). In its Indo-Pacific Strategy report, the Biden Administration states that the U.S. "welcomes a strong and independent ASEAN that leads in Southeast Asia", "endorses ASEAN centrality" and will launch "new high-level engagements on health, climate and environment, energy, transportation, and gender equity and equality" ([The White House, 2022b](#), pp. 9–10). It also mentioned the South China Sea, reaffirming the legal validity of the so-called "Arbitral Tribunal ruling on the South China Sea" and publicly rejecting China's claim of territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests over the islands and reefs in the region ([U.S. Department of State, 2021a, 2022](#),

pp. 11–30). The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2022 approved by the U.S. Congress provides annual assistance and training funds of \$50 million to ASEAN to advance the Indo-Pacific Maritime Security Initiative, which aims to improve the naval and maritime law enforcement capabilities of Southeast Asian countries (U.S. Congress, 2021).

Second, it has increased its efforts in forward diplomacy. The Biden administration attached great importance to diplomatic activities in the Indo-Pacific region. In 2021, Biden himself held talks with then Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga of Japan in April and then President Moon Jae-in of South Korea in May at the White House. He also hosted or attended the QUAD Leaders' Meeting, the U.S.–ASEAN Summit and the East Asia Summit video conference, the video conference of APEC leaders, and the U.S.–ASEAN Special Summit. Vice President Harris visited Singapore and Vietnam in August 2021. Secretary Blinken visited Japan and South Korea in March 2021, attended five ASEAN-related ministerial video conferences in May, visited India in July, Indonesia, and Malaysia in December (the trip to Thailand was canceled), and Australia and Fiji in February 2022. Lloyd Austin, Secretary of Defense, visited Japan, South Korea, and India in March 2021, and Singapore, Vietnam, and the Philippines in July. Jake Sullivan, National Security Advisor, visited Japan and South Korea in March 2021. Gina Raimondo, Secretary of Commerce, visited Japan, Singapore, and Malaysia in November 2021. Katherine Tai, Trade Representative, visited Japan, South Korea, and India in November 2021 and Singapore in April 2022. Wendy Sherman, Deputy Secretary of State, visited Indonesia, Cambodia, and Thailand in June 2021. The Indo-Pacific Strategy report emphasized that the United States will focus on every corner of the Indo-Pacific region, from Northeast and Southeast Asia to South Asia and Oceania; and that the United States will open new embassies and consulates in the Indo-Pacific region, particularly in Southeast Asia and the Pacific islands (The White House, 2022b, pp. 5, 15). This is to revise Southeastern Asian countries' perception of being neglected during the Trump administration, to demonstrate the high importance the U.S. attaches to the region, and to compete with China for regional influence.

Third, it emphasizes shoring up weak links in the economy. The Trump administration's Indo-Pacific Strategy was widely criticized for the U.S. withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and its overemphasis on military security. The Biden administration, in an attempt to shore up the economic weak links of Trump's strategy, proposed the Building Back Better World (B3W) initiative and the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, in the hope of counterbalancing China's Belt and Road Initiative. In June 2021, during the G7 summit, the seven countries, with U.S. facilitation, proposed an infrastructure investment initiative — B3W. It was stated that through B3W, the G7 and other like-minded partners will coordinate in mobilizing private-sector capital in four areas of focus — climate,

health, and health security, digital technology, and gender equality — with catalytic investments from their respective development finance institutions, to help narrow the \$40 trillion infrastructure need in the developing world ([The White House, 2022b](#), p. 15). In October 2021, in a video conference at the East Asia Summit, Biden proposed to build the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework. The initiative focuses on trade promotion, digital economy and technology standards, supply chain resilience, clean energy, infrastructure, tax and anti-corruption ([The White House, 2021d](#)). The Indo-Pacific Strategy report further proposes that the U. S. will work with allies to advance the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, develop new approaches to trade and a digital economy framework that meet high labor and environmental standards, advance resilient and secure supply chains, invest in clean energy and decarbonization, and work with the G7 states to promote high-standards infrastructure ([The White House, 2022b](#), pp. 11–12). The Biden Administration plans to launch this economic framework in the first half of 2022 to strengthen U.S. economic ties with the Indo-Pacific region.

Fourth, it has promoted forward military deterrence. The Biden administration tries to maintain U.S. military advantage in the West Pacific by strengthening defense cooperation with Indo-Pacific allies and enhancing forward military deployment in the Indo-Pacific region. In June 2021, Lloyd Austin, U.S. Secretary of Defense, put forward “integrated deterrence”, meaning that the U.S. will integrate the U.S. and its allies’ military capability across all warfighting domains and the spectrum of conflicts, in order to “reinforce deterrence and counter coercion” and “dissuade or defeat aggression in any form or domain”. “Integrated deterrence” attaches great importance to the innovation of military technology and new concepts of operations, emphasizing joint exercises and interoperability. It seeks to strengthen collective military advantage by linking military defense bases with its allies, integrating defense supply chains, and co-producing key technologies. The U.S. also plans to expand the U.S. Coast Guard presence in the Indo-Pacific region, to bolster its partners’ capability to deal with civilian security challenges ([The White House, 2022b](#), pp. 12–13). In the 2022 National Defense Strategy, the Biden administration defined China as the “most consequential strategic competitor and the pacing challenge”, and proposed to adopt “integrated deterrence” and other approaches to enhance U.S. capability of military deterrence at the forefront and achieve its Indo-Pacific and global military objectives ([Office of Management and Budget, 2022](#), pp. 18–19, 53).

4. Major Challenges for the Biden Administration’s Indo-Pacific Strategy

The Biden administration sees the Indo-Pacific region as the pivot of U.S. global strategy. It intends to involve its Indo-Pacific and global partners in an all-round

competition against China in politics, economy, security, and other fields to maintain U.S. hegemony in the region. In August 2021, the Biden administration hastily withdrew troops from Afghanistan without consulting its allies, in spite of the deteriorating situation in the country. This underscores the U.S. strategic intent to end the 20-year counter-terrorism efforts in Afghanistan and shift its focus to the Asia-Pacific region and initiate a new era of strategic competition against China. However, the Russia–Ukraine conflict in February 2022 showed that the Biden administration's view of China as the “top security challenge” of the U.S. was clearly overstated. If the conflict remains unresolved, the Biden administration will be severely handicapped in implementing its foreign policy and will be less likely to achieve its strategic ambitions in the Asia-Pacific in collaboration with Europe. Although U.S. National Defense Strategy 2022 proposes to prioritize “China's challenges in the Indo-Pacific region”, the profound changes and adjustments in the international order and major power relations caused by the Russia–Ukraine conflict are bound to affect the implementation of the Biden administration's Indo-Pacific Strategy. The emerging uncertainties include the following:

- (A) Global strategic balance. After taking office, the Biden administration upgraded QUAD, established AUKUS, increased investment in forward regional diplomacy and “integrated deterrence”, and released the Indo-Pacific Strategy report in the wake of the Russia–Ukraine conflict. All these moves demonstrated the Biden administration's emphasis on the Indo-Pacific region. However, the outbreak of the dragging conflict between Russia and Ukraine will inevitably impact the implementation of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy. After the conflict broke out, the United States and its Western allies imposed several rounds of sanctions of unprecedented harshness against Russia in aspects such as finance, technology, trade, energy, and in the core decision-making circle. Some scholars believe the Russia–Ukraine conflict will change Russia's relations with Europe and the United States (Slaughter *et al.*, 2022). Additionally, to support Ukraine and accommodate the Baltic states and NATO allies in Eastern Europe, the Biden administration has already deployed additional troops and new weaponry to relevant countries to fulfill its security commitments and deter Russia. In March and May 2022, the U.S. Congress passed spending bills of, respectively, \$13.6 billion (Uria, 2022) and \$40 billion in funding for the military and humanitarian emergency assistance, and provided \$3.8 billion in weaponry to Ukraine (Guyer, 2022). On April 5, 2022, Mark Milley, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told the House Armed Services Committee, “I think NATO, the United States, Ukraine, and all of the allies that are supporting Ukraine are going to be involved in this for quite some time. This is a protracted conflict that needs to

be measured in terms of years... I don't know about a decade, but at least years for sure" (House Armed Services Committee, 2022). In this context, although the Biden administration considers the Indo-Pacific region as the strategic focus, it will be less able to fulfill its ambitions in the region, as it is faced with a conundrum of how to maintain the strategic balance in the Indo-Pacific region and in Europe.

- (B) The limit of financial investment. The match between available means and resources and strategic objectives is an important indicator for the successful implementation of a strategy. Without sufficient financial investment, even the best strategic plan will end up nothing more than a castle in the air. The Biden administration's ambitious Indo-Pacific Strategy, which focuses on every corner of the Indo-Pacific region and is to be promoted in all aspects, cannot be achieved without strong financial support. Faced with the prevailing populism, soaring inflation, government debt crisis within the U.S., and the huge financial gap in social welfare, economic transformation, and other reform agenda, the Biden administration does not have enough financial resources to support this ambitious regional strategy. This, coupled with the impact of the Russian–Ukraine conflict, made the Biden administration even more overstretched financially. Adam Smith, U.S. House Armed Services Committee Chairman, pointed out, "the Russian invasion in Ukraine fundamentally altered what our national security posture, what our defense posture needs to be...Posture-wise, yes, we're going to need to do more in Eastern Europe...I don't think we can forget about Asia because the presence does matter, so I think we're going to need to balance those two things" (Eversden, 2022). However, Mathew Burrows and Robert Manning of the Atlantic Council's Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security noted that the United States cannot afford a "double Cold War" with two major powers — China and Russia. "Opening two Cold War battlegrounds at the same time means higher military spending, greater global economic uncertainty and a deviation from the Biden administration's fundamental goal of rebuilding the U.S." (Burrows and Manning, 2022). Whether the Biden administration could adequately fund its expansive strategy is a test to its strategic seriousness (Schake, 2022).
- (C) The difficulty of coordinating its allies. In promoting its Indo-Pacific Strategy, the Biden administration placed particular emphasis on the role of allies. However, the Biden administration faces at least two major challenges in strengthening coordination among allies, especially on how to make them join the U.S. in implementing the Indo-Pacific Strategy and form a united front against China.

- (a) How to gain the trust of its allies. Although the Biden administration claimed “America is back” and repeatedly stressed the importance of allies, it is commonly perceived that U.S. national power is in decline and that retrenchment is the major trend for the U.S. global strategy. Moreover, Biden is widely regarded as a “weak president”, whose willingness and ability to pursue an “Indo-Pacific strategy” remain unknown. Therefore, some of the allies are bound to doubt this ambitious strategy and the prospects of its implementation. According to *Kyodo News*, Japan has stated in a public document that the era of the overwhelming U.S. power has ended and that Japan plans to increase its defense budget and strengthen its self-defense capabilities (*Kyodo News*, 2022). If even Japan, a steadfast ally, has doubts about U.S. comprehensive power and security capabilities, so will other Asia-Pacific allies that are less powerful and less close to the U.S.
- (b) Different interests and demands of the allies and partners. Most of the U.S. Indo-Pacific allies and partners, with the exception of Australia and Japan, do not share the U.S. policy toward China and its vision of the Asia-Pacific order, especially India and ASEAN. The U.S. has high expectations for India, a major power in South Asia, whose superior geographical location, growing great power ambitions and competitive relationship with China have made it the western anchor of U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy. Like the Obama and Trump administrations, the Biden administration has made great efforts to win India over and enhance India’s great power status. However, India has a diplomatic tradition of non-alignment and strategic autonomy. Although its relations with the U.S. have developed rapidly in recent years, India is not willing to become an ally or a pawn of the United States. While developing relations with the U.S., India does not want to give up relations with China or antagonize China in public. As Indian Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar stated, “cooperation between India and China may determine the course of the Asian century” and that India and China must have a strategic vision that transcends politics as well as historical and practical limitations to manage the complexities of Sino-Indian relations (*Jaishankar*, 2020, pp. 117–134). In March 2022, when meeting with Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi, Jaishankar further clarified that India attaches great importance to its relations with China, with no changes made in its strategic assessment of the importance of China. He said that India is ready to strengthen communication with China and enhance mutual trust, so as to get the bilateral relations out of the trough as soon as possible, and continuously push for pragmatic cooperation between the two countries (*FMPRC*, 2022).

ASEAN has been doubtful about U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy and QUAD. Although ASEAN has issued the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, its main objective is to maintain the centrality of ASEAN and the peace, stability, and prosperity of the region. ASEAN does not support the U.S. view of China as a competitor and is not willing to take sides between the two countries. ASEAN countries believe that the fundamental prerequisite for ensuring peace and prosperity in Southeast Asia is to stay away from major power disputes and avoid becoming the arena for major power competition. Only when the two powers coexist peacefully can the Southeast Asian region maintain peace and prosperity. Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has repeatedly expressed that Southeast Asian countries welcome the U.S. to attach importance to the region, but do not want to take sides between the United States and China, “because many U.S. friends and allies wish to preserve their extensive ties with both powers. No good outcome can arise from a conflict. It is vital for the U.S. and China to strive to engage each other, to head off a clash which would be disastrous for both sides, and the world” (Lee, 2021). ASEAN is more concerned that restarting and upgrading QUAD will jeopardize the centrality of ASEAN (Stromseth, 2021). For a long time, ASEAN-centered multilateral mechanisms such as the ASEAN Summit, the East Asia Summit, and the ASEAN Defense Ministers’ Meeting have played a leading role in integrating regional politics, economics, and culture. They are also important mechanisms for ASEAN countries to set regional agendas and exert a major influence despite being small powers. By promoting QUAD and upgrading it to a “premier regional grouping” and increasing QUAD cooperation and agenda-setting capabilities in such issues as maritime security, infrastructure, climate change, and the response to COVID-19, the U.S. is in fact weakening and dwarfing the role of ASEAN, limiting the so-called “ASEAN centrality” to Southeast Asia rather than the entire Indo-Pacific region. This is not in line with the ambition of ASEAN’s Outlook on the Indo-Pacific.

5. The Impact of Biden Administration’s Indo-Pacific Strategy on Asia-Pacific Order

The Biden administration claimed that the U.S. intensified its focus on the Indo-Pacific because it has major political, economic, and security interests in the region, which are facing mounting challenges, especially from China. The objective of the U.S. “is not to change the PRC but to shape the strategic environment in which it operates” (The White House, 2022b, p. 5). The 2022 National Defense Strategy emphasized “prioritizing the PRC challenges in the Indo-Pacific” (U.S. Department of Defense, 2022, p. 1). Seeing China as a competitor and strategic challenge, the Biden administration seeks to use its allies and partners to contain

China, in order to build an Indo-Pacific order in line with U.S. interests and values. This regional strategy, which is guided by U.S.–China strategic competition and aims to maintain U.S. hegemony, is bound to threaten the existing regional order and U.S.–China relations.

First, it will impact the regional political order. The Biden administration has stressed multiple times that the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy fully considers the needs of the Indo-Pacific countries and has no intention of launching a “new Cold War” against China, nor does it require the countries in the region to take sides between China and the U.S. However, the Biden administration has drawn a line in the sand by the standard of Western democracy, exaggerated China’s “authoritarian challenge” and “economic coercion”, and formed a variety of value-based alliances and issue-oriented networks. In fact, the Biden administration is trying to instigate ideological competition and camp confrontation in the region, which is contrary to the burgeoning trend of regional economic integration. Some U.S. scholars have pointed out that the Biden administration has defined the U.S.–China strategic competition as a “broader conflict between democracy and autocracy” in the 21st century, and that “the prospect of the two countries slipping into an ideological competition reminiscent of the Cold War” is worrisome (Levine, 2021). Some ASEAN countries expressed deep concerns about this and made it clear that they did not want China and the U.S. to clash outright in Southeast Asia, arguing that this would drag Southeast Asia into a new Cold War. But this did not prevent the Biden administration from launching a comprehensive competition against China, nor did it slow down the pace of the U.S. building issue-oriented alliances against China.

Second, it will disrupt the regional economic order. Since the 21st century, due to China’s booming economy and expanding market size, the Asia-Pacific region enjoyed rapid economic development and became the engine for global economic growth. Meanwhile, economic integration in the Asia-Pacific Region advanced rapidly under the promotion of Japan, ASEAN, and other major regional economies. The conclusion of the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) in 2018 and the official entry into force of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (RCEP) in 2022 gave a strong impetus to multilateral free trade and economic integration in the Asia-Pacific region. The U.S. does not want to see China expand its economic influence in the region, and is concerned that the accelerated integration in the Asia-Pacific will adversely affect U.S. economic interests. With populism and protectionism rising within the country, the U.S. can neither substantially participate in nor advance any multilateral free trade agreements, nor is it able to further open up its domestic market. Therefore, the U.S. is increasingly concerned about China’s Belt and Road Initiative and the expansion of its regional economic influence. David Dollar and Jonathan Stromseth, senior fellows at the Brookings Institution’s John L. Thornton

China Center, noted that China is “undermining” U.S. influence in the Asia-Pacific region through economic diplomacy initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (Dollar and Stromseth, 2021). They argue that the Biden administration should enhance its economic engagement with Asia in order to sustain U.S. power and influence in the region and facilitate its strategic competition against China. The Biden administration is trying to restrain China’s Belt and Road Initiative through B3W, Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, and other initiatives, under the banner of improving transparency in rules, labor and environmental standards, and anti-corruption. In addition, the Biden administration is also trying to form an exclusive supply chain groups and an economic framework exclusive of China on the excuse of opposing economic coercion and ensuring supply chain security. These initiatives, once implemented, will disrupt the established economic activities, industrial division of labor and economic order in the Asia-Pacific region, and will adversely affect economic development and integration in the region.

Third, it will increase regional security risks. The Biden administration has been creating tension within the region by strengthening bilateral military alliances, upgrading QUAD, forming AUKUS, gathering allies inside and outside the region to cause turbulence in the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait, and implementing the Pacific Deterrence Initiative and “integrated deterrence”. Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea are of prominent significance in the Biden administration’s Indo-Pacific Strategy. In terms of the Taiwan Strait, the current and former commanders of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command have on several occasions hyped “the possibility of mainland China using force against Taiwan” (Shelbourne, 2021; The Guardian, 2021). The Biden administration has repeatedly emphasized the need to strengthen military sales to Taiwan and enhance Taiwan’s capabilities for asymmetric defense. The Indo-Pacific Strategy report asserts that the U.S. will “work with partners inside and outside of the region to maintain peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait, including by supporting Taiwan’s self-defense capabilities, to ensure an environment in which Taiwan’s future is determined peacefully in accordance with the wishes and best interests of Taiwan’s people” (The White House, 2022b, p. 13). While the Biden administration has stated multiple times that the U.S. position on the one-China policy has not changed, it has also been seeking to enhance Taiwan’s defense capabilities, sending warships across the Taiwan Strait for muscle flexing and signaling pro-independence forces in Taiwan. The U.S. National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2022 notes that the U.S. policy in the Taiwan Strait is to prevent mainland China from using force against Taiwan and creating a “*fait accompli*”. To this end, the U.S. will increase military sales to Taiwan and enhance Taiwan’s asymmetric military capabilities (U.S. Congress, 2021, pp. 1248–1250).

As for the South China Sea, the Biden administration urged China to comply with the so-called “Arbitral Tribunal Ruling on the South China Sea” (U.S.

Department of State, 2021a), and issued the report *Limits in the Seas: People's Republic of China: Maritime Claims in the South China Sea*, challenging the legal basis of China's sovereignty over the islands and reefs in the South China Sea and related maritime rights and interests (U.S. Department of State, 2022, pp. 11–30). In addition, the Biden administration continues to send ships and aircraft to conduct so-called “freedom of navigation” operations and hold large-scale military exercises in the South China Sea, and encourage Australia, Japan, Britain, France, Germany, and other countries in the region and beyond to do the same. The Biden administration has also helped Southeast Asian countries improve their maritime domain awareness and maritime operation capabilities through the Indo-Pacific Maritime Security Initiative and other approaches. It also sent the U.S. Coast Guard into the South China Sea for law enforcement, helped train the coast guards of relevant Southeast Asian countries, and conducted “gray area” maritime actions against China. These diplomatic provocations, military deterrence, and group tactics have increased tensions in the South China Sea and threatened regional peace and stability.

Fourth, it will exacerbate the U.S.–China strategic competition. The Biden administration stresses that the Indo-Pacific Strategy is a regional strategy rather than a China strategy, and that the strategic objective is not to change China but to shape the strategic environment in which it operates. However, the Indo-Pacific strategy report itself and the policy initiative taken by the U.S. indicate that the Indo-Pacific strategy aims primarily at containing China. The report claims that the intensifying U.S. focus on the region is due to the mounting challenge from China. By promoting a “free and open Indo-Pacific”, the U.S. aims to counter China's “authoritarianism”, “economic coercion” and “regional security threat”. By advancing forward diplomacy, “integrated deterrence” and Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, it seeks to compete with China for regional influence and dominance. By enlisting its allies and forming cliques, it aims to facilitate its strategic competition against China. Given the rising strategic mistrust and suspicion between the two countries, U.S. hostility against China will only aggravate the risks of antagonism and even conflicts and will be adverse to building mutual respect, peaceful coexistence, and win–win cooperation between the two countries.

6. Conclusion

The Asia-Pacific region has developed a unique “dual leadership” system of economic dependence on China and security dependence on the U.S. during the past thirty years since the end of the Cold War. Most Asia-Pacific countries have benefited from China's economic boom, and China has become the largest trading partner and a stable export market for many countries in the region. Meanwhile, the

U.S. Asia-Pacific allies continue to rely on the U.S. for security and maintain their military and security relations. While some Asia-Pacific countries are pleased with this new dynamic in the regional landscape, this has frustrated the U.S., which is nostalgic for the post-Cold War unipolarity, and exacerbated its anxiety about China's rising economic and political influence in the region. From the Obama administration's "Pivot to Asia" strategy to the Trump administration's "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" strategy and to the Biden administration's "Indo-Pacific Strategy," the U.S. strategic fear of and doubts about China have increased, coupled with fears of losing its regional hegemony.

The Biden administration's "Indo-Pacific Strategy" is ostensibly about maintaining a "free and open Indo-Pacific", but actually seeks to shape a regional order that is favorable to U.S. interests and values. Despite being a regional strategy, it is actually a great power competition strategy targeting particularly at China. It claims to care for the interests of regional allies and the needs of regional governance, but in fact is essentially centered on U.S. strategic interests. This regional strategy that is teemed with hegemonic anxiety and zero-sum thinking will not only impact the political, economic, security order, and regional economic integration dynamics in the Indo-Pacific region, but also impede healthy and steady relations between China and the U.S.

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