

**FROM TRUMP TO BIDEN:  
INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGIES  
COMPARED**

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## Executive Summary

1. The Trump and Biden administrations' strategies for a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" feature more continuity than change but retain key differences.
2. Diplomatically, both strategies emphasise multilateral engagement as well as US support for regional institutions such as ASEAN and APEC.
3. Militarily, the strategies seek to promote greater coordination with US allies and partners such as Australia, Japan, Republic of Korea, the Philippines, Thailand, India and Taiwan.
4. Economically, both strategies seek to promote US standards of trade and investment, offer alternative forms of development finance, and blunt coercive economic practices.
5. Nonetheless, key differences are accentuated when comparing the two administrations' actions in practice with their written strategies.
6. The Trump administration's declassified *US Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific* is more China-centric than the Biden administration's *Indo-Pacific Strategy*.
7. Trump's framework subsumes nearly all US efforts in the region under the goal of maintaining American primacy and contesting Chinese influence.
8. While the Biden administration's *Indo-Pacific Strategy* highlights challenges posed by the PRC, including economic coercion, military pressure on allies and partners, and violations of human rights and international law, China is only one among several regional challenges identified, including climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic.

9. To combat these broader transnational threats, the Biden administration proposes providing support for regional public goods such as sustainable development and vaccine production.
10. The Biden administration places greater emphasis in both word and deed on engaging partners and allies in the region. It presents its strategy as a complement rather than a replacement to the centrality of regional institutions like ASEAN.
11. The Biden administration “pivots to Asia through Europe” by inviting organisations like NATO and the G7 to take an active role in the region.
12. Instead of pressuring countries to side with the United States in all security, economic, governance and cultural domains, the Biden administration takes a “big tent” approach by inviting countries to join US initiatives on discrete issues such as digital trade and supply chain resilience.

# FROM TRUMP TO BIDEN: INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGIES COMPARED

Paul HAENLE\*

## Background

- 1.1 At a press availability in July 2022, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken outlined in concise terms the core principles on which the Biden administration’s Indo-Pacific strategy is based. He stated, “We have a commitment to and a vision...of this region and its future, one that is free, one that is open, one that is secure”. “And that means”, he continued, “that people, products, investment can move about freely and go where it’s needed. It means that countries can make their own decisions about their own futures, their own policies, free from coercion... It means that people in those countries can live freely, speak freely, and aspire to an even better life in the future”.<sup>1</sup>
  
- 1.2 Across the board, the Biden administration has advanced a “principles-first” approach to engagement in the Indo-Pacific, departing from its predecessor’s “America First” foreign policy. This principles-based strategy has manifested in deeper multilateral engagement with US allies and partners, a more credible pairing of rhetoric with actions, and a constructive emphasis on providing public goods to the region. The Biden administration’s commitment to these principles has thrown into stark relief the contrasting visions of the international order proposed by the United States in its Indo-Pacific Strategy, on the one hand, and that proposed by China and Russia in their 4 February 2022 “Joint Statement”, on the other hand.

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<sup>1</sup> “Secretary Antony J. Blinken At a Press Availability”, 10 July 2022. <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-at-a-press-availability-20/>, accessed 22 July 2022.

- 1.3 Nonetheless, the Biden administration has opened itself up to criticism by emphasising principles, at times, at the expense of tangible policy successes. Others contend that the administration has not fully adhered to its own principles of freedom and openness, especially in the field of international trade policy. Still others argue that the Biden administration has undermined the United States’ strategic footprint by promoting values above interests in a region with a variety of distinct political systems.
- 1.4 On balance, however, the Biden administration has revitalised US influence and standing in the Indo-Pacific and the international community through an appeal to the liberal values on which US foreign policy has been based for the better part of the last seven decades and which form the bedrock of international law and norms enshrined in the UN Charter.
- 1.5 Since the end of World War II in 1945, the United States has maintained a significant force posture and close diplomatic, economic and security ties to allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific. The Trump and Biden administrations’ emphasis on the Indo-Pacific as a contiguous region built upon efforts by the second Bush administration and the Obama administration to strengthen US partnerships in the Asia Pacific.<sup>2</sup> In 2015, the Pacific Command broke new ground by introducing strategic guidance containing language on America’s vision for the “Indo-Asia-Pacific”.<sup>3</sup> Subsequently, in recognition of the “increasing connectivity” between the Pacific and the Indian Oceans as well as the rise of India, the US Department of Defence officially announced that the US Pacific Command would become the US Indo-Pacific Command in 2018.<sup>4</sup>
- 1.6 Prior to the codification and the institutionalisation of the US Indo-Pacific strategy, numerous states within and without the region were advancing their own visions for addressing Indo-Pacific policy challenges. In his “Confluence of the Two Seas”

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<sup>2</sup> Nina Silove, “The Pivot before the Pivot: U.S. Strategy to Preserve the Power Balance in Asia”, *International Security* (Volume 40: 4), 1 April 2016.

<sup>3</sup> “U.S. Pacific Command Guidance”, 27 May 2015. <https://www.pacom.mil/Portals/55/Documents/USPACOM%20Mission%20Vision%20Guiding%20Principles.pdf>, accessed 22 July 2022.

<sup>4</sup> “History of United States Indo-Pacific Command”, <https://www.pacom.mil/About-USINDOPACOM/History/>, accessed 22 July 2022.

speech delivered to the Indian parliament in 2007, Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo highlighted the importance of building a “broader Asia” based on principles of freedom, transparency, democracy and human rights.<sup>5</sup> In 2013, Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa called for an Indo-Pacific-wide treaty of “friendship and cooperation”, modelled on the norms enshrined in ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), such as confidence building, peaceful resolution of disputes and consensus-based decision making.<sup>6</sup> That same year, Australia’s Defence White Paper delineated trends that were “shaping the emergence of the Indo-Pacific as a single strategic arc”.<sup>7</sup> In 2015, the Indian Navy released its maritime security strategy, identifying a “shift in worldview from a Euro-Atlantic to an Indo-Pacific focus and the repositioning of global economic and military power”.<sup>8</sup> In 2017, Japan launched its official report outlining principles for a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific”.<sup>9</sup> Other global powers such as France, Germany and Britain have also adopted Indo-Pacific frameworks of their own.

- 1.7 The proliferation of novel and, at times, contrasting visions of Indo-Pacific security, means that a common regional framework will take time to develop. Nonetheless, the ubiquity of attention paid to the Indo-Pacific as a contiguous regional architecture reflects its rising importance to global stability and prosperity. McKinsey Global Institute forecasts that the region will account for more than 50% of global GDP (gross domestic product) by 2040.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Abe Shinzo, “Confluence of the Two Seas”, 22 August 2007. <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/pm0708/speech-2.html>, accessed 22 July 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Marty Natalegawa, “An Indonesian perspective on the Indo-Pacific”, keynote address by H E Dr R M Marty M Natalegawa, minister for foreign affairs, Republic of Indonesia, 16 May 2013, Centre for Strategic and International Studies, Washington DC.

<sup>7</sup> “2016 Defence White Paper”, 25 February 2016. <https://www.defence.gov.au/about/publications/2016-defence-white-paper>, accessed 22 July 2022.

<sup>8</sup> “Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian MARITIME Security Strategy”, October 2015. [https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/sites/default/files/Indian\\_Maritime\\_Security\\_Strategy\\_Document\\_25Jan16.pdf](https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/sites/default/files/Indian_Maritime_Security_Strategy_Document_25Jan16.pdf), accessed 22 July 2022.

<sup>9</sup> “Priority Policy for Development Cooperation”, April 2017. <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000259285.pdf>, accessed 22 July 2022.

<sup>10</sup> “Asia’s future is now”, 14 July 2019. <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/asia-pacific/asias-future-is-now>, accessed 22 July 2022.

- 1.8 As the Indo-Pacific becomes increasingly integral to the global economy, its security environment is facing mounting risks. Many speculate that the region’s “long peace” could be unravelling due to the impact of intensifying sub-regional conflicts on the Korean Peninsula, along the China-India and India-Pakistan borders, and in the South and East China Seas, Indian Ocean and Taiwan Strait.<sup>11</sup> Increasing US-China competition also poses risks to regional stability. Moreover, the Indo-Pacific faces risks from climate change, felt most acutely in the Pacific Islands and Mekong River Basin, as well as humanitarian crises in Myanmar and Laos.
- 1.9 Key US interests in the region include defending US treaty allies: Australia, Japan, Republic of Korea, the Philippines and Thailand; promoting open trade and investment; upholding international law and norms of sovereignty, human rights and freedom of navigation; mitigating transnational threats such as climate change, pandemics and nuclear proliferation; and preventing the emergence of regional hegemony.
- 1.10 To advance these interests, the Trump and Biden administrations have promoted distinctive Indo-Pacific strategies combining various diplomatic, economic and security initiatives.

### **Diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific**

- 2.1 Despite the Trump administration’s novel focus on the Indo-Pacific as a region of strategic importance, his administration largely neglected effective engagement with regional partners. Coined “parachute diplomacy”, high-level officials in the Trump administration would ‘parachute’ in, reaffirm US commitment to the region and leave without forming lasting initiatives on which sustained diplomacy could be based. The administration also preferred to engage bilaterally rather than multilaterally, evidenced by Trump’s decision not to appoint a resident ambassador to ASEAN, against the request of the House Foreign Affairs Committee.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> “Is the long peace in Asia unravelling?” 26 August 2019. <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/is-the-long-peace-in-asia-unraveling/>, accessed 22 July 2022.

<sup>12</sup> “ASEAN Caucus to POTUS: Nominate ASEAN Ambassador”, <https://castro.house.gov/media-center/press-releases/asean-caucus-potus-nominate-asean-ambassador>, accessed 22 July 2022.

- 2.2 The greatest focus of the Trump administration’s diplomatic efforts was on strengthening ties with India. Although Trump and Modi were unable to agree on a trade deal, in 2018 India became the third Asian country (after South Korea and Japan) to get Tier-1 Strategic Trade Authorisation from the United States.<sup>13</sup> Having improved US-India economic relations, the administration then aimed to enhance the defence relationship. The United States and India formed a strategic security partnership that included Washington selling New Delhi over \$3 billion in weapons in February 2020.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, the Trump administration worked with India, Australia and Japan to hold the first ministerial-level Quad talks in Manila ahead of the November 2017 ASEAN summit.<sup>15</sup> The Trump administration’s Indo-Pacific strategy, published in 2019, claimed that the United States’ “strategic partnership with India, a fellow democracy of 1.3 billion people... is reaching new heights”.<sup>16</sup>
- 2.3 When President Biden assumed office in January 2021, he sought to fill the gaps in President Trump’s regional engagement. During Biden’s first speech on foreign policy in February 2021, he declared that the United States would “[lead] with diplomacy” and that such diplomacy would be “rooted in America’s most cherished democratic values: defending freedom, championing opportunity, upholding universal rights, respecting the rule of law, and treating every person with dignity”.<sup>17</sup> The Biden administration premised its diplomatic efforts on the recognition that engagement with foreign leaders serves to further all US interests abroad, including those in the economic and security domains.

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<sup>13</sup> “India Third Asian Nation to Get STA-1 Status from U.S.”, <https://www.thehindu.com/business/Economy/india-third-asian-nation-to-get-sta-1-status-from-us/article24603607.ece>, accessed 22 July 2022.

<sup>14</sup> “India To Purchase Over \$3 Billion Defence Equipment from U.S.”, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-india-usa-trump-military-idCAKCN20J0ZY>, accessed 21 July 2022.

<sup>15</sup> “India-Australia-Japan-U.S. Consultations on Indo-Pacific”, [https://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/29110/IndiaAustraliaJapanUS\\_Consultations\\_on\\_IndoPacific\\_November\\_12\\_2017](https://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/29110/IndiaAustraliaJapanUS_Consultations_on_IndoPacific_November_12_2017), accessed 22 July 2022.

<sup>16</sup> “A Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision”, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Free-and-Open-Indo-Pacific-4Nov2019.pdf>, accessed 15 July 2022.

<sup>17</sup> “Remarks by President Biden on America’s Place in the World”, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/02/04/remarks-by-president-biden-on-americas-place-in-the-world/>, accessed 22 July 2022.



- 2.4 To this end, in October 2021, Biden attended the first US-ASEAN summit since 2016. Earlier in July 2021, US Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin visited Singapore, Vietnam and the Philippines, and US Vice President Kamala Harris called on Singapore and Vietnam in August 2021. US Secretary of Commerce Gina Raimondo travelled to Singapore and Malaysia in November and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken made a trip to Malaysia and Indonesia in December 2021. As a result of these diplomatic overtures, the United States’ diplomatic score shot up 15.5 points in the latest edition of the Lowy Institute’s Asia Power Index, surpassing China as the most diplomatically powerful player in the region.<sup>18</sup>
- 2.5 Despite the war in Ukraine, the Biden administration continued to place significant emphasis on Indo-Pacific diplomacy. In early February 2022, as the crisis in Ukraine was building up, the United States opted to hold a ministerial-level Quad meeting in Melbourne, Australia,<sup>19</sup> followed by an executive-level Quad summit in Tokyo in May.<sup>20</sup> In Tokyo, the United States launched the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) with 12 other regional partners. In June, several US Indo-Pacific allies—Australia, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea—participated at the leader level for the first time at the NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation) summit in Madrid, Spain.<sup>21</sup>
- 2.6 The administration has made a particular focus on expanding US diplomacy in the Pacific Islands in recognition of the region’s centrality to maritime commerce and security in the Pacific Ocean. In January 2022, US Indo-Pacific coordinator Kurt Campbell claimed that the Pacific Islands was the region most likely to witness a “strategic surprise”. Subsequently, in April, China announced the signing of a new

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<sup>18</sup> Lowy Institute, “Asia Power Index: Key Findings 2021”, <https://power.lowyinstitute.org/downloads/lowy-institute-2021-asia-power-index-key-findings-report.pdf>, accessed 22 July 2022.

<sup>19</sup> “Joint Statement on Quad Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific”, <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-on-quad-cooperation-in-the-indo-pacific/#:~:text=We%2C%20the%20Foreign%20Ministers%20of,fourth%20Quad%20Foreign%20Ministers%20Meeting.>, accessed 22 July 2022.

<sup>20</sup> “Fact Sheet: Quad Leaders’ Tokyo Summit 2022”, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/05/23/fact-sheet-quad-leaders-tokyo-summit-2022/>, accessed 22 July 2022.

<sup>21</sup> “NATO Leaders Meet with Key Partners to Address Global Challenges, Indo-Pacific Partners Participate in a NATO Summit for the First Time”, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_197287.htm#:~:text=Indo%2DPacific%20partners%20Australia%2C%20Japan,invited%20to%20become%20NATO%20members.](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_197287.htm#:~:text=Indo%2DPacific%20partners%20Australia%2C%20Japan,invited%20to%20become%20NATO%20members.), accessed 22 July 2022.

security pact with the Solomon Islands, followed by an attempt to ink a wider security pact with the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF). The Biden administration, for its part, despatched Secretary of State Antony Blinken to Fiji in February, Indo-Pacific coordinator Kurt Campbell to the Solomon Islands in April and Vice President Kamala Harris to the Pacific Islands Forum in July where she announced the appointment of the first-ever US Envoy to PIF.<sup>22</sup> The administration also plans to provide stepped-up funding to the Pacific Islands Forum for fisheries assistance and to open a US Agency for International Development office to help the region better respond to climate change. In August, Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman visited Samoa, Tonga and the Solomon Islands to further underscore US commitment to engagement in the region.

### **Economic Policy: From China-Centric to Partner-Based**

- 3.1 On his first day in office, President Trump signed an executive order removing the United States from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP).<sup>23</sup> Prior to Trump, membership in TPP, part of the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia", was considered the centrepiece of US foreign policy in the region. Efforts to establish the TPP could be traced back to the Bush administration, which launched the Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA) with ASEAN in 2006 and acceded to an expanded version of the "P-4 grouping" (New Zealand, Chile, Singapore and Brunei). The withdrawal from TPP defined Trump's "America First" agenda, which focused on advancing unilateral American economic interests through "big stick" diplomacy rather than striking multi-stakeholder agreements. This action triggered uncertainty among the 11 remaining TPP members, many of whom were long-time US allies and partners, and cast doubt on the United States' commitment to regional prosperity and stability.

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<sup>22</sup> "Remarks By Vice President Harris at the Pacific Islands Forum", <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/07/12/remarks-by-vice-president-harris-at-the-pacific-islands-forum/>, accessed 22 July 2022.

<sup>23</sup> Office of the United States Trade Representative (2017). "The United States Officially Withdraws from the Trans-Pacific Partnership", <https://ustr.gov/about-us/policy-offices/press-office/press-releases/2017/january/US-Withdraws-From-TPP>, accessed 1 August 2022.

- 3.2 In place of the TPP, the Trump administration launched a trade war against the People’s Republic of China in 2018. Washington’s increasingly protectionist policies towards Beijing, in part, reflected the American business community’s growing negative views of the operating environment in China. Whereas the TPP sought to shape the economic policy environment around China by codifying a high-standards trade deal, the Trump administration’s trade war sought to redress China’s trade and economic abuses through direct punitive measures. In terms of its impact on the wider Indo-Pacific, the trade war diverted trade away from China and towards alternative manufacturing centers, such as Vietnam and Taiwan.<sup>24</sup> Although the Trump administration’s international trade policy mainly targeted China, the United States also imposed tariffs on imported steel and aluminum from every country except Mexico and Canada, damaging the United States’ credibility as a champion of free trade.
- 3.3 In an attempt to compete with China’s Belt and Road Initiative, the Trump administration launched the Blue Dot Network (BDN) in November 2019 – a multilateral initiative among Australia, Japan and the United States with the goal of furthering economic development through encouraging private investment in infrastructure. The BDN aimed to certify infrastructure projects that met high standards of transparency and sustainability, giving US pension funds and insurance companies the confidence to invest and chip away at the estimated \$13 trillion investment gap.<sup>25</sup> Unlike the BRI, the BDN does not directly fund infrastructure projects, but rather identifies specific projects for low-risk private investment.
- 3.4 The Trump administration also launched the Better Utilisation of Investments Leading to Development Act of 2018 (BUILD Act) to provide private sector capital to developing countries.<sup>26</sup> The BUILD Act inaugurated the US International

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<sup>24</sup> Bob Davis and Lingling Wei (2022). “Who Won the U.S.-China Trade War?” *The Wall Street Journal*, 20 May. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/who-won-the-u-s-china-trade-war-11653059611>, accessed 1 August 2022.

<sup>25</sup> “Forecasting infrastructure investment needs and gaps”, *Infrastructure Outlook*. [https://web.archive.org/web/20200412043145mp\\_/https://outlook.gihub.org/](https://web.archive.org/web/20200412043145mp_/https://outlook.gihub.org/), accessed 1 August 2022.

<sup>26</sup> “S.2463 - BUILD Act of 2018”, Congress.gov, 27 February 2018. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/senate-bill/2463>, accessed 1 August 2022.

Development Finance Corporation (DFC), an update on the Overseas Private Investment Corporation, to provide private sector capital to countries in need.

- 3.5 President Biden assumed office recognising the importance of rebuilding US economic leadership through concrete efforts to bolster Indo-Pacific economic connectivity. In May 2022, President Biden and a dozen Indo-Pacific partners launched the IPEF, which focuses on four pillars: digital trade, supply chain resilience, sustainability and anticorruption.<sup>27</sup> The potential to form a regional digital trade pact to promote cross-border data flows would represent a major step forward for new economy trade and integration in the region. IPEF was designed as a non-traditional trade deal to circumvent US Congressional approval and survive future US administrations with potentially more protectionist leanings. A key feature of IPEF is its flexibility: countries will be allowed to participate in each of the agreement's pillars selectively without signing onto the entire framework, bolstering its attractiveness.
- 3.6 In June 2021, along with G7 leaders, President Biden launched the Build Back Better World (B3W) Partnership to meet “the tremendous infrastructure needs of low- and middle-income countries” by investing “hundreds of billions of dollars” in the coming years.<sup>28</sup> In contrast to Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative, the B3W was intended to abide by high labour, transparency and sustainability standards.<sup>29</sup> The administration followed up B3W with the announcement of the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII) to mobilise \$600 billion of private and public-sector financing for developing countries in the Indo-Pacific and beyond.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> “FACT SHEET: In Asia, President Biden and a Dozen Indo-Pacific Partners Launch the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity”, The White House, 23 May 2022. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/05/23/fact-sheet-in-asia-president-biden-and-a-dozen-indo-pacific-partners-launch-the-indo-pacific-economic-framework-for-prosperity/>, accessed 1 August 2022.

<sup>28</sup> “FACT SHEET: President Biden and G7 Leaders Launch Build Back Better World (B3W) Partnership”, The White House, 12 June 2021. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/06/12/fact-sheet-president-biden-and-g7-leaders-launch-build-back-better-world-b3w-partnership/>, accessed 1 August 2022.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> “FACT SHEET: President Biden and G7 Leaders Formally Launch the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment”, 26 June 2022. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/06/26/fact-sheet-president-biden-and-g7-leaders-formally-launch-the-partnership-for-global-infrastructure-and-investment/>, accessed 1 August 2022.

- 3.7 In June 2021, the Biden administration published a 250-page “100-Day Reviews under Executive Order 14017” with the new term “ally and friend-shoring” to say that the United States would need to strengthen supply chains with allies and partners in order to ensure more resilience in key goods such as semiconductors, pharmaceuticals and rare earths.<sup>31</sup> In July 2022, while visiting South Korea, Janet Yellen appealed to trusted allies to face the global supply chain challenge collectively “to reduce dependency on China”, using friend-shoring as the tool.<sup>32</sup> The Biden administration’s strategy of “friend-shoring” differs from the Trump administration’s strategy of “reshoring” in its emphasis on the force multiplier effect of engagement with allies and partners.
- 3.8 On China trade policy, the Biden administration has opted to keep the Trump administration’s Section 301 tariffs in place. There have been debates within the administration between the US Trade Representative (USTR), Treasury Department and Commerce Department about the merits of lifting tariffs to bring inflation down or maintaining tariffs as a form of leverage vis-à-vis Beijing. US domestic politics ahead of the 2022 midterm elections adds a third variable to the calculus. As of August 2022, President Biden was reportedly still deciding whether to lift tariffs on some goods from China.<sup>33</sup> On 2 September, USTR announced that tariffs would remain in place while it continues its four-year statutory review.<sup>34</sup>

### **Security Strategy: Same Ends, Different Means**

- 4.1 While the Trump and Biden administrations shared goals for Indo-Pacific security, they employed different means to advance their respective visions. The Biden

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<sup>31</sup> “100-Day Reviews under Executive Order 14017”, *The White House*, June 2021. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/100-day-supply-chain-review-report.pdf>, accessed 1 August 2022.

<sup>32</sup> Yvonne Lau (2022). “What is friendshoring? Janet Yellen’s new strategy for fixing the supply chain crisis”, *Fortune*, 20 July 2022. <https://fortune.com/2022/07/19/what-is-friendshoring-janet-yellens-new-strategy-fixing-supply-chain-crisis/>, accessed 1 August 2022.

<sup>33</sup> Yuka Hayashi and Alex Leary (2022). “Biden Still Undecided on Chinese Tariffs, Commerce Secretary Says”. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/biden-still-undecided-on-chinese-tariffs-commerce-secretary-says-11661864401>, accessed 1 August 2022.

<sup>34</sup> Office of the US Trade Representative (2022). <https://ustr.gov/sites/default/files/2022-09/4-Year%20Review%20FRN%20090222.pdf>, accessed 6 September 2022.

administration has maintained the Trump administration’s overall posture vis-a-vis China, adopting competition over engagement as its organising principle. However, the Biden administration has demonstrated more fidelity to its words. In particular, the Biden administration has strengthened alliances, partnerships and multilateral frameworks in the pursuit of regional security. Where the Trump administration took a zero-sum approach to the region—defined negatively in terms of countering China’s influence—the Biden administration has set forth an affirmative vision for the Indo-Pacific. It hopes to address the security challenges posed by China but does not ignore transnational challenges such as climate change, health security, nonproliferation, humanitarian crises and counternarcotics.

- 4.2 The Trump administration ranked “maintain[ing] U.S. strategic primacy in the Indo-Pacific” as its top priority in *US Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific*. In zero-sum terms, the strategy framed China as a threat to American “preeminence” as “Chinese military influence will continue to...challenge the U.S. ability to achieve its national interests”. In response, the Trump administration set out to “enhance the credibility and effectiveness of [U.S.] alliances” by aligning its policies with those of Japan, South Korea and Australia, revitalising “alliances with the Philippines and Thailand” and solidifying “an enduring strategic partnership with India...as a counterbalance to China”. It emphasised enabling Taiwan “to develop its own asymmetric defence strategy and capabilities” and denuclearising the Korean Peninsula. While the administration called for “expanded engagement on non-traditional security challenges”, it notably omitted climate change, reflecting a lack of either awareness or interest in addressing the region’s priorities.
- 4.3 The Trump administration struggled to fulfil many of the goals in its strategy due in part to the fact that the administration set vague and unachievable objectives. In addition, President Trump undermined his own administration’s strategy as he repeatedly cast doubt on Washington’s regional commitments and asserted that American allies should shoulder a greater burden of regional security provision themselves.<sup>35</sup> Likewise, Trump minimised the value of US alliances: when

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<sup>35</sup> Laura Zhou and Viola Zhou, “Donald Trump’s Early East Asia Summit Exit Casts Doubts Over US Ties to Asia”, *South China Morning Post*, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2119926/donald-trumps-early-summit-exit-casts-doubt-over-us>, accessed 2 August 2022.

Philippine President Duterte terminated the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA), President Trump responded, “I don’t really mind...it will save a lot of money”.<sup>36</sup> President Trump viewed US-ROK-Japan ties through the same lens, pressing both allies to spend billions more to offset the United States’ regional defence costs.

4.4 To its credit, however, the administration succeeded in expanding defence ties with Japan, Australia and India. In 2017, the administration revived the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (‘the Quad’) and subsequently aligned its Indo-Pacific concept with the rest of the Quad. Additionally, the Trump administration deepened bilateral security cooperation with India, selling over \$18 billion of arms in 2019, transferring advanced weaponry and communication systems, and conducting expansive joint exercises such as Tiger Triumph.<sup>37</sup> In the same vein, the Trump administration sustained strong military ties with Taiwan. Over the course of his presidency, the United States sold over \$12 billion in arms to Taiwan. Finally, the administration advanced freedom of navigation in the South China Sea by conducting frequent Freedom of Navigation Operations (FNOPs) and endorsing the 2016 UNCLOS ruling that rejected the PRC’s maritime claims to the Scarborough Reef and Spratly Islands.<sup>38</sup>

4.5 In its 2022 *US Indo-Pacific Strategy*, the Biden administration stated that the United States would “prioritize [its] single greatest asymmetric strength: [its] network of security alliances and partnerships” as the primary means of supporting regional stability. Besides collective security, the Biden administration has been focused on providing additional public goods to the region, including climate resilience, health security and humanitarian disaster relief. To that end, the strategy advocates for greater coordination with US allies and partners such as Australia, Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Thailand, India and Taiwan. The document labels

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<sup>36</sup> Steve Holland and David Brunnstrom “Trump Says He Does Not Mind if Philippines Cuts Military Pact with U.S.”, Reuters, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-philippines-usa-defense-trump/trump-says-he-does-not-mind-if-philippines-cuts-military-pact-with-u-s-idUSKBN2062TL>, accessed 2 August 2022.

<sup>37</sup> Zach Montague “US-India Defense Ties Grow Closer as Shared Concerns in Asia Loom”, *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/20/world/asia/india-military-exercises-trump.html>, accessed 2 August 2022.

<sup>38</sup> “Statement by Secretary Michael R. Pompeo, U.S. Position on Maritime Claims in the South China Sea”, <https://la.usembassy.gov/statement-by-secretary-michael-r-pompeo-u-s-position-on-maritime-claims-in-the-south-china-sea/>, accessed 2 August 2022.

“integrated deterrence [as] the cornerstone” of the administration’s security policy. Integration suggests not only interoperability between different branches of the US military as well as different agencies of the US government, but also integration with allies and partners, serving to “dissuade and defeat aggression”. In practice, integration will manifest in “increasing the scope and complexity of joint exercises and operations and pursuing diverse force-posture opportunities that will strengthen our ability to operate forward and more flexibly with allies and partners”.<sup>39</sup> The *2023 Pacific Deterrence Initiative* outlines the Department of Defence’s \$6.1 billion investment to “develop capabilities, operational concepts, and planning to strengthen deterrence in the Indo-Pacific”.<sup>40</sup>

4.6 The Biden administration has followed through on its multilateral approach. In September 2021, the United States launched AUKUS, a trilateral security partnership with Australia and the United Kingdom to “deepen diplomatic, security, and defense cooperation in the Indo-Pacific”. AUKUS will not only deploy Australia’s nuclear-powered submarine capability, but also improve interoperability among the three navies. Beyond conventional military coordination, AUKUS plans to develop advanced dual-use capabilities in quantum computing, artificial intelligence, advanced cyber, hypersonics and electronic warfare.<sup>41</sup> These efforts serve to bolster short-term conventional deterrence capabilities while improving long-term dual-use research and development.

4.7 The administration has also reinforced the Quad, placing greater emphasis on how the partnership “can deliver tangible results to the region” in the form of vaccine distribution, humanitarian assistance, disaster relief and climate action. In March 2021, President Biden attended the first executive-level Quad leaders’ summit. In the summit readout, China was not even named once. Rather than focus on

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<sup>39</sup> ‘U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States’, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf>, accessed 2 August 2022.

<sup>40</sup> ‘Pacific Deterrence Initiative: Department of Defense Budget Fiscal Year 2023’, [https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/FY2023/FY2023\\_Pacific\\_Deterrence\\_Initiative.pdf](https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/FY2023/FY2023_Pacific_Deterrence_Initiative.pdf), accessed 2 August 2022.

<sup>41</sup> FACT SHEET: Implementation of the Australia – United Kingdom – United States Partnership (AUKUS) 5 April 2022. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/04/05/fact-sheet-implementation-of-the-australia-united-kingdom-united-states-partnership-aucus/>, accessed 2 August 2022.



countering challenges posed by China, Quad leaders unveiled new initiatives to provide public goods and address common challenges in the Indo-Pacific, including COVID-19, climate change, terrorism and humanitarian disasters.<sup>42</sup>

4.8 On yet another multilateral front, President Biden has sought to strengthen the trilateral relationship between the United States, Japan and South Korea. Through multiple ministerial meetings, the Biden administration has grounded Japan-South Korea-US cooperation in terms of shared democratic values and common threats, in particular, with respect to North Korea. The three sides have also emphasised their common position on the war in Ukraine, preference for democracy in Myanmar, support for ASEAN centrality, and advanced their shared vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific.<sup>43</sup> President Biden met Japanese Prime Minister Kishida and South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol on the sidelines of the NATO summit in July 2022. Practically, the meeting served as a first step in enhancing trilateral cooperation on the threat posed by North Korea. Symbolically, it demonstrated US ability to convene allies with poor bilateral relations in the pursuit of regional security.

4.9 Unlike the Trump administration’s flashy summit diplomacy with North Korea—which achieved little in terms of tangible results—the Biden administration has prioritised extended deterrence with Northeast Asian allies, while keeping open the possibility of unconditional diplomacy with Pyongyang. In August 2022, Japan, South Korea and the United States held trilateral missile defence exercises for the first time since 2017, after which time relations between Seoul and Tokyo deteriorated amid historical disputes dating to Japan’s 1910-1945 occupation of the Korean peninsula.<sup>44</sup>

4.10 The Biden administration has also sought to strengthen security ties with Indo-Pacific allies and partners on a bilateral basis. First, the Biden administration has

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<sup>42</sup> “Quad Joint Leaders’ Statement”, <https://au.usembassy.gov/quad-joint-leaders-statement/>, accessed 2 August 2022.

<sup>43</sup> Joint Statement on the Republic of Korea-U.S.-Japan Trilateral Vice Foreign Ministerial Meeting, 8 June 2022. <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-on-the-republic-of-korea-u-s-japan-trilateral-vice-foreign-ministerial-meeting/>, accessed 2 August 2022.

<sup>44</sup> “Japan, South Korea and U.S. hold first trilateral missile defense drills since 2017”, *Japan Times*, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2022/08/16/national/politics-diplomacy/japan-south-korea-us-military-drills/>, accessed 2 August 2022.

sustained the Trump administration's efforts in deepening America's strategic partnership with India. The Biden administration hopes to replace Russia as India's arms supplier of choice.<sup>45</sup> In the Philippines, Secretary of Defence Austin restored the Visiting Forces Agreement, facilitating future large-scale joint exercises in the region. In a July 2022 joint communique, the United States and Thailand pledged to "expand and strengthen our strategic partnership to prevent conflict, preserve a peaceful security environment, [and] promote free expression and civil and political rights".<sup>46</sup> Compared to its predecessor, the Biden administration has scaled back arms sales to Taiwan, selling only \$300 million since January 2021. In late August 2022, the Biden administration signalled plans to ask Congress to approve a US\$1.1 billion arms sale to Taiwan that included hundreds of missiles for fighter jets and anti-ship systems. The Biden administration has broadened and expanded the efforts of previous administrations to equip Taiwan for asymmetric warfare and internationalise support for the island.

- 4.11 The Trump administration's unilateral and confrontational approach to China and US allies "unmoored American strategy from its grounding in the pursuit of shared interests".<sup>47</sup> The Trump administration confronted the limits of "America First" as an organising principle for regional security as it attempted to reconcile a nationalistic doctrine with providing a regional public good such as collective security. Like the Trump administration before it, the Biden administration recognises the need to compete with China in order to maintain and expand American influence in the Indo-Pacific. Unlike the Trump administration, however, the Biden administration views influence as a means to an end, not an end in itself. Simply put, US power should be used to address regional challenges, which should not be addressed solely to advance US power. Compared to his predecessor,

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<sup>45</sup> Sudhi Ranjan Sen and Peter Martin, "US Seeks to Wean India from Russian Weapons with Arms-Aid Package", Bloomberg, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-05-17/us-seeks-to-wean-india-from-russia-weapons-with-arms-aid-package#xj4y7vzkg>, accessed 2 August 2022.

<sup>46</sup> "United States-Thailand Communique on Strategic Alliance and Partnership", <https://www.state.gov/united-states-thailand-communique-on-strategic-alliance-and-partnership/>, accessed 2 August 2022.

<sup>47</sup> Lindsey Ford, "The Trump Administration and the Free and Open Indo-Pacific", [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/fp\\_20200505\\_free\\_open\\_indo\\_pacific.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/fp_20200505_free_open_indo_pacific.pdf), accessed 2 August 2022.

President Biden has a genuine interest in leveraging US alliances and partnerships to provide a critical collective good—peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific.

### **Policy Recommendations**

- 5.1 On balance, the Biden administration has achieved success in revitalising US influence and standing in the Indo-Pacific through stepped-up regional diplomacy and engagement with allies and partners. Nonetheless, the Biden administration, as well as future administrations, has room to improve in order to further advance the United States’ vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific.
- 5.2 First, the administration’s focus on leading with values has, at times, undermined US interests. The Biden team has been correct to form stronger partnerships with countries that share American values. Taken too far, however, this tendency can alienate countries that do not share US values. In 2021, according to the *Regimes of the World* classification, there were 89 democracies and 90 autocracies in the world. Seventy per cent of the world population – 5.4 billion people – live in closed or electoral autocracies.<sup>48</sup> In the Indo-Pacific, American values have little purchase among ASEAN countries such as Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, Malaysia and Singapore. While the Biden administration’s “Summit for Democracy” helped promote democratic solidarity on a global scale, it did little to increase America’s standing in Asia, a region where few countries were invited to the Summit. Washington can continue to champion liberal values, strengthen partnerships with democratic regimes and encourage reform in countries with autocratic governance without placing states in immutable categories such as “democracy” and “autocracy”. Indeed, the Biden administration has already achieved success in strengthening partnerships with flawed democracies like Thailand, the Philippines and India, in part, by recognising that the United States and its partners both have room to improve their adherence to democratic norms. As Blinken stated at a recent press availability, “One of democracy’s unique strengths

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<sup>48</sup> ‘DEMOCRACY REPORT 2022 Autocratization Changing Nature?’ March 2022. [https://v-dem.net/media/publications/dr\\_2022.pdf](https://v-dem.net/media/publications/dr_2022.pdf), accessed 2 August 2022.

is the ability to acknowledge our flaws and work to address them”.<sup>49</sup> Washington should continue to work with Japan, South Korea and ASEAN to condemn the Burmese military junta and its execution of democracy activists. In sum, the United States should continue to encourage democratic reform in partners and adversaries alike, while downplaying the clash between democracies and autocracies as an organising principle of US foreign policy.

- 5.3 Second, the administration must prove that it can deliver practical economic results for countries in the region. The Biden administration has made progress in advancing principles of free and fair trade and investment through its Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, but tangible deliverables from IPEF remain to be seen. If market access commitments continue to be unpalatable to the US polity, future administrations should instead emphasise trade facilitation agreements as a viable alternative. Demonstrating that the United States is committed to cutting costs and red tape in order to facilitate trade with partners in the Indo-Pacific will go a long way in reclaiming US standing as a high-standards rule-setter on regional trade and investment. The longer that the United States waits to deliver practical economic results for the region, the more it will reinforce the narrative that it is more focused on regional security than on regional prosperity.
- 5.4 Third, the Biden administration risks muddling its approach to Asia by approaching the region through two distinct lenses: one focused on the broader region, the other on China. Although the February 2022 Indo-Pacific strategy presents a vision for the Indo-Pacific beyond responding to China’s rise, in practice, it appears as though the administration is filtering its regional approach through competition with Beijing. Asian countries, however, neither want to be forced to choose between the United States and China nor caught in the middle of the two giants’ intensifying competition. The United States should work with Asian countries for its own, as well as for their sake, rather than because of Beijing’s growing influence. It is imperative that the United States does not make regional countries feel like pawns in a broader geopolitical contest with China.

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<sup>49</sup> “Secretary Antony J. Blinken At a Press Availability”, 10 July 2022. <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-at-a-press-availability-20/>, accessed 22 July 2022.

- 5.5 Fourth, Washington should refrain from lecturing, or punishing, countries that take actions that harm American interests, or writing off countries like Cambodia and Laos as resigned to Chinese domination. After the revelation that China is constructing a naval base in Cambodia, US officials warned Phnom Penh that there would be “consequences” should Beijing use the facility. Such actions will not help the United States’ cause with countries deep in China’s camp. Instead, the administration should offer a more constructive and affirmative vision for future engagement based more on carrots than sticks. In this effort, the United States should enlist partners like Japan and South Korea to provide greater economic opportunities to the Mekong sub-region.
- 5.6 Finally, the administration should act on its claim that the Indo-Pacific is the key domain of “intensifying American focus”, not only for US diplomacy, but also for the US military.<sup>50</sup> After nearly 75 years as the region’s pre-eminent military power, the United States can no longer guarantee a favourable balance of power in the Indo-Pacific on its own.<sup>51</sup> The current speed and scale of change in the Department of Defence is inadequate to ensure credible deterrence in the Indo-Pacific. The 2021 *Global Force Posture* review included few new commitments to the Indo-Pacific region.<sup>52</sup> The US Congress will need to authorise funding for the Pacific Deterrence Initiative above and beyond the Pentagon’s \$6.1 billion request for fiscal year 2023. Funding should prioritise investments in defensive and deterrence capabilities so as to avoid triggering a destabilising arms race in the region.

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<sup>50</sup> “U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States”, February 2022. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf>, accessed 2 August 2022.

<sup>51</sup> “Asia-Pacific Regional Security Assessment 2022”, June 2022 <https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-dossiers/asia-pacific-regional-security-assessment-2022/aprsa-chapter-1>, accessed 2 August 2022.

<sup>52</sup> “Statement by Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III on the Initiation of a Global Force Posture Review”, 4 February 2021. <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/2494189/statement-by-secretary-of-defense-lloyd-j-austin-iii-on-the-initiation-of-a-glo/>, accessed 2 August 2022.

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