

# US Indo-Pacific Strategy: From Donald Trump to Joe Biden

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**Abstract:** *Over the past decades, great powers, typically the United States, have consistently pursued strategies to enhance their influence and protect their national interests in the Indo-Pacific, a crucial geopolitical and geostrategic region. In late 2017, as US President, Donald Trump announced the Indo-Pacific strategy which centered on containing the rise of China and maintaining America's No.1 status. In January 2021, Joe Biden took over from Donald Trump after his four-year tenure and followed the same strategy. The paper aims to explore differences between the two presidents' strategic approaches to the Indo-Pacific to explicate the new adjustments in the US foreign policy to the region.*

**Keywords:** Indo-Pacific Region, Target, Strategy, the United States, China, Donald J. Trump, Joe Biden

## Introduction

At the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) held in Vietnam (November 2017), former US President D. Trump mentioned the term “Indo-Pacific” in the strategy to build a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP). This phrase continues to appear many times in the US National Security Strategy (NSS), replacing the previously popular term “Asia - Pacific”, which has indicated a change in vision as well as an emphasis on US strategy for the region. In early 2021, Joe Biden became the 46<sup>th</sup> US President, continuing to inherit the strategy from President Donald Trump's era but making adjustments to better match the announced foreign policy goals. The US government, under any president,

always considers China as the main rival, challenging its power, influence, and interests, eroding its security and prosperity. The US “Indo-Pacific” strategy is, therefore, considered as the core tool to restrain China's “rising” power in the region.

### 1. The Trump administration's “Indo-Pacific” strategy

In the Indo-Pacific strategy report published in June 2019 by the US, President D. Trump outlined the shift of the world political center to the Indo-Pacific region, considering it “the most important separate area to the future of America” (The Department of Defense, 2019). Trump acknowledged that political issues in the Indo-Pacific region play an essential role in the national

security and world leadership of the United States. In November 2019, the U.S. State Department continued to release a progress report on the implementation of the Indo-Pacific strategy and affirmed that the US participation in this region is a top priority in President D. Trump's policy (The U.S. Department of State, 2019).

With the common goal of maintaining economic interests, political power, military, and diplomatic strength, as well as restraining countries that challenge America's position in the region - typically China, the Trump administration approaches the strategy in the following directions: (i) Seeing the rise of China as the greatest threat to regional stability, more importantly, to the standing of the United States; (ii) Resolutely having a comprehensive confrontation with China, alongside military might is a trade war, economic coercion and diplomacy to give a strong response to China's rise; (iii) One of the main pillars to realize the strategy is the allied policy.

The formation of the Quad or "diamond quadrilateral", which includes the US, Japan, India, and Australia, is aimed at sharing common interests, values, and perceptions of security threats, creating a power balance favorable for maintaining the order in the Indo-Pacific region. In addition, the US enhances the partner networks and the mechanism of the tripartite gathering of forces (such as the US - Japan - Korea; the US - India - Japan) pragmatically and flexibly. The US upholds ASEAN's central role in the region, intensifies engagement through multilateral and bilateral mechanisms, and focuses on cooperation with Southeast Asian countries based on two main pillars of security and

economy (The U.S. Department of State, 2019).

According to the above approach, the Trump administration has promoted the implementation of the "Indo-Pacific" strategy from four aspects, namely: (i) *Economic*, continuing to strengthen cooperation with large markets, maintaining the leading position; (ii) *Foreign affairs and politics*, reinforcing relations with allies, creating a strategic balance between the US and political power centers; (iii) *Defense and security*, the United States works closely with the region in the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula, protecting the rights and freedoms of navigation in the East and South China Seas, preventing the proliferation of terrorist forces; supporting close allies to maintain superior military power; (iv) *Culture*, the US expects the strategy to spread the American values of freedom, democracy, human rights, nation, religion and makes the American culture penetrated more and more intensively into the region.

Despite the efforts of the Trump administration, America's partners do not seem to actively build a common free and open region, this is because of D. Trump's instinctive actions and personal decisions which often affect and undermine the given policies. Donald Trump's absence at important meetings and his consistent suspicion about alliances have overshadowed the transparency in the relationship that the Trump administration has built. According to Professor G.M. Lokshin (Russian Academy of Sciences), D. Trump's alliance policy is considered "strange" because of its variability and instability, from the adjustment of approaches to the old allies and the

search for the new ones. The US has been more active in restoring and expanding cooperation with allies and partners, however, all adjustments have been made in the US's favour (Локшин Г.М., 2019).

Although D. Trump has left the White House, his administration has had a lot of influence in the Indo-Pacific region. The US has made some steady confrontation moves to China, restored regional order, and rallied allies. However, Joshi, Atmakuri (2021: 10) point out that this strategy also faces many difficulties such as (i) The lack of coordination in implementing the policy in the Trump administration's Indo-Pacific; (ii) Serious tensions in relations between the US and several countries in the region resulted from Trump's economic isolation as well as the "reciprocity" requirement; (iii) The international public doubt about the implementation of the strategy derived from the domestic political polarization between the Democratic Party and the Republican Party as well as Trump's frequent change of key leadership apparatus.

According to Joshi, Atmakuri (2021: 12), D. Trump has always clearly shown his tough attitude towards China's "disregard" in the Indo-Pacific region. Even so, the "transactionism" in his foreign policy and his insistence on "reciprocity" has led strategic partners to doubt the sincerity of US commitments.

American researcher Roger Cliff (2020) stated that the only way for the US to possibly protect and promote its interests in the Indo-Pacific region in the next decade is to become a part of a coalition of nations with common goals and values. Therefore, the strategy should focus on strengthening America's relations with major democracies (typically the Quad) and making them

stronger and more secure. This requires boosting economic growth, reinforcing defense capabilities, and ending regional conflicts.

## **2. The Biden administration's approach towards the Indo-Pacific strategy**

In early 2021, the US presidential election ended with the victory belonging to J. Biden. As soon as he took office, President J. Biden showed noticeable changes in the initial foreign policy compared to his predecessor. Over the past four years, America's international standing has been more or less affected by the approach of D. Trump's "America First" policy. After taking office, President J. Biden gradually restored American values intending to bring "America back". J. Biden considers Indo-Pacific a priority area and the Quad cooperation mechanism as a US foreign policy pillar for the Indo-Pacific region. There, China is the only adversary capable of its combining economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to mount a challenge to a stable and open international system (The White House, 2021: 8).

Remaining the goal of restraining China, the Indo-Pacific strategy is regularly implemented by the Biden administration under four pillars, including: (i) *Diplomacy*, emphasizing the commitment to a rules-based order, criticizing China's drastic actions; (ii) *Security*, maintaining a military presence and strengthening deterrence with China; (iii) *Economic*, promoting investment initiatives, especially encouraging the role of the private sector; (iv) *Governance*, making commitments to advocate democratic standards and values (Dinh Tuan Anh, 2021).

Inheriting the freedom and openness in the Indo-Pacific strategy of predecessor D.

Trump, the new administration, withal, has added two elements, namely: promoting human rights and being committed to abiding by the international rules-based order. At the same time, the Biden administration also made adjustments in its approach towards the strategy, such as: *First*, unlike D. Trump's unilateral policy of complete confrontation, the Biden administration competes with China through close cooperation with allies and multilateral negotiations; continuing to take a tough stance with China but possibly cooperating on key issues such as climate change prevention. *Second*, Biden's goal is to restore and strengthen cooperation with alliances being "neglected and exploited" during the Trump administration to protect common interests and respond to today's increasing challenges in the region. *Third*, J. Biden limited personal decision-making and developed human resources to make effective regional policy. This creates a cooperative consensus and consolidates their current bilateral and multilateral relations (King, 2021). President J. Biden also acknowledged that D. Trump's trade war with China was over and would choose to compete with China from a "position of strength". Relying on allies instead of acting unilaterally like in the D. Trump era is a big difference in the Biden administration's strategic approach towards the strategy (Сергей Строкань, Павел Тарасенко, 2021).

Going against the D. Trump administration's approach, President J. Biden has achieved several new commitments to the Indo-Pacific region through key high-level meetings. His first multilateral commitment was the Quad Summit held on March 12, 2021, where the countries officially reached

a Joint Statement delivering a tough stance against China's behavior. In addition, the Biden administration continues to uphold the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS 1982), considers China's claims "illegal", and supports Southeast Asian countries. It is expected that in the fiscal year 2022, the US will allocate more than 5 billion USD to the framework of the "Pacific Deterrence Initiative" (PDI) to increase the ability to respond to challenges in the region, improve the capacity to deal with a strategic relationship with China and promote cooperation with other countries. This attracted great international attention, marking an important step forward in the US relationship with the Indo-Pacific region in the context of China's continuing "rising" (cited by King, 2021).

According to international researcher Hitoshi Tanaka (2021: 3), the Biden administration will take back its global leadership by increasing its presence across the Indo-Pacific, strengthening the relationship with its allies, prioritizing alliances, and identifying new partners when formulating the competitive strategy with China. The US seeks to decouple global supply chains from China in key areas such as trade, high technology, and investment. However, today, China is still an important driver of global economic growth and a major trading partner of most countries in the region. It is justifiable for the US to diversify its supply chain, avoiding too much dependence on China, but its attempt to completely remove China from the supply chain would be an act of self-destruction to the economy. Maintaining economic dependence with China is necessary to protect regional and global economic prosperity.

In the work *Correcting the course: How the Joe Biden Administration should compete for influence in the Indo-Pacific* (2021), the authors review that there still exists a lack of focus and urgency in the Biden administration's approach to the Indo-Pacific region. Despite the revival of US regional policy, a comprehensive regional strategy or confirmation for international priority towards the Indo-Pacific region has yet been articulated in the Biden administration's decision. The success of the strategy may be limited because it is still mainly focused on security issues, while the economic ones are in second place (Townshend, Patton, Corben, Warden, 2021: 2).

Townshend, Patton, Corben, Warden, (2021: 3) argue that to compete for influence in the Indo-Pacific region, the Biden administration should: (i) Identify the Indo-Pacific region as its foreign and defence policy priority; (ii) Clearly define the goals of relations with China; (iii) Avoid emphasizing ideological competition with China and instead focus on maximizing its influence by responding to regional needs; (iv) Prevent Chinese aggression and bolster its investment in the Western Pacific military posture; (v) Empower its allies; (vi) Pay special attention to Southeast Asia as a region of strategic importance; (vii) Make Commitments to mutually beneficial economic engagement with the Indo-Pacific region.

### **3. Reactions by several countries to the new Joe Biden administration's Indo-Pacific**

Dealing with the change in the US approach to the Indo-Pacific strategy, countries in the region have shown different reactions. The fact that US President J. Biden significantly

increased America's defense and foreign policy commitments to the Indo-Pacific region has received great support from the Quad. Quad countries believe that the creation of a free and open region is very important for the future of each one. Even so, the allies also limit their interference in the US-China strategic competition. On the one hand, these countries want to see the US as a counterweight to China to give them more opportunities in politics. On the other hand, they worry that the increased confrontation between the US and China may cause instability in the whole region and affect their economic and political stability (Schriver et al., 2021).

Japan is the first country to propose the concept of "Indo-Pacific", therefore, it always strives to build and protect the order established by the US in the region against challenges from China. R.G. Schriver et al. (2021) assessed that the Indo-Pacific strategy under the Trump administration lacked clarity and practicality because D. Trump showed a little view of the region. In contrast, President J. Biden's strategy will focus and engage more with countries in the region, especially Southeast Asia. Japan is identified as an important partner of the US in dealing with foreign policy issues related to China. However, Japan has always clearly separated its security concerns from economic ties with China. Japan remains committed to economic dependence, and China has always been Japan's largest trading partner.

India plays an important role in the US Indo-Pacific strategy, however, the country always integrates elements of balance and reassurance to avoid "unsatisfactory" in its foreign relations with both China and the United States. India and the US share

common concerns, mainly related to China's refusal to abide by the rules-based order in the region. India agrees with Trump's tough stance and assertive confrontation with China but thinks that the US under Trump is still not ready to accept the idea of a multipolar Asia and innovations in security cooperation (Rajagopalan, 2020). Since taking office, Biden has continued to maintain the US-India relationship. Biden's policy towards India is a combination of cooperation and concern for democratic normative values and human rights. The strategic relationship remains to originally counter China's "rise". Essentially, India supports Biden's approach to lay the foundation for a strong strategic partnership and counter the growing geostrategic challenges posed by China in the region. India is also more interested in promoting diplomatic and military relations with Quad countries and wishes to join the US in institutionalizing this group into a collective security system in the Indo-Pacific region (Paskal, 2021: 25-29).

Australia is one of the countries that strongly and actively supports the US "Indo-Pacific" concept, it is also the first country to use this term in official documents. As a dependent ally of the US, Australia, on the one hand, follows the US Indo-Pacific strategic guidance, on the other hand, it acts as a mediating leader for the competition between great countries through different institutional means. Australia follows the "pragmatic tradition", choosing the balance like India (He, Li, 2020: 4).

G. King (2021) believes that the new strategic approach of the Biden administration is a major development for Australia to respond to the challenging region and strengthen the rules-based order. J. Biden's

official announcement, emphasizing the importance and value of alliances as well as taking a tough stance against China's behavior, marks a favorable foreign policy platform for Australia. Therefore, Australia and the Quad will always seek to maintain America's attention in the Indo-Pacific region in the future.

ASEAN, located as it is at the very center of the Indo-Pacific, helps to maintain common stability and acts as a diplomat to prevent competition among major powers in the region. However, ASEAN countries seem to be under pressure from the US Indo-Pacific strategy to choose between the US and China. According to Feng Liu (2020), the escalating US-China competition also weakens ASEAN's central role in the r. Therefore, ASEAN countries have adopted a hedging strategy, strengthening practical bilateral cooperation with each country. ASEAN does not want to become "stuck" in the US-China strategic competition and is always wary of any present strategy bearing confrontation with China.

China does not support the concept of "Indo-Pacific", so far there has been no official Chinese document using this term. China believes that the US Indo-Pacific strategy is only aimed at encircling and restraining China from causing conflict and bolstering the militarization of the region. China considers it "outdated Cold War thinking" and insists it "will never pursue a policy that benefits itself by harming the interests of other countries". China views the Quad as an "Asian NATO" designed to contain China (Galloway, 2021).

The Chinese government also has not had any official response to the US strategy because China's goal has always been to reduce national security risks and expand

international influence. However, many analysts believe that China's Belt and Road strategy (BRI) could be a "card" in the future Indo-Pacific regionalism. At this time, the BRI is an economic initiative, but China's massive investments in infrastructure and industries are sure to have significant impacts across the Indo-Pacific (Батюк, 2021).

### Conclusion

Although the Biden administration's Indo-Pacific approach has changed from that of the Trump administration, it remains the core strategic goal that restrain China's behavior and strengthen the role of the United States and its allies in the region. The unpredictable policies of Trump have raised questions about America's commitment to the region, but the new Biden administration is expected to bring positive developments to the Indo-Pacific by consolidating relationships with alliances in the region.

The Indo-Pacific is an area vital to the security and prosperity of the United States, but also the epicenter of the US-China strategic competition. Therefore, any change in the strategic approach towards China, or in the US commitment to restoring alliances, will have implications not only for the future of the Indo-Pacific region but also for the position of the US itself. The administration's handling of a rising China is also expected to pose serious challenges to the US-led international order (Chansoria, 2021: 3) □

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