

Three Pillars in the Biden Administration's China Strategy: Allies, Values, and High-Tech

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The Biden Administration has inherited its predecessor's strategic perception about the growing competition among great powers. As a result, its policy toward China has been largely an extension of its predecessor's, retaining the elements of competition and revising the instruments to outcompete China. The Biden Administration's China policy has revolved around three pillars—allies, values, and high-tech, which it believes are America's strengths in its relations with China. Since Biden took office, the United States has spent most of its diplomatic resources consolidating and building smaller security, economic, and tech alliances with membership restricted to democratic allies only, in an attempt to delink from China and consolidate its hegemonic status in the world. This policy carries the pernicious effect of plunging the world into Cold War-like confrontations.

Keywords: United States, China Policy, allies, values, high-tech

Introduction

Like the Trump Administration that identified China as a “revisionist” power wanting to “shape a world antithetical to U.S. values and interests” (The White House, 2017, p. 25), the Biden team has inherited that perception pinpointing China as “the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to advance that objective” (The White House, 2022, p. 8). High ranking officials in the Biden Administration have repeatedly stated that the United States would approach China from a position of strength, which, according to Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken, comes from having strong alliances, engaging in the world, standing up for American values, investing in the American people, making sure the U.S. military is properly postured (U.S. Department of State, 2021). This article is an attempt to look into how the Biden Administration has tried to make the best of its position of strength in its China policy by focusing on three aspects: the first is restoring alliances to align American efforts with its allies and partners to act with common purpose; the second is reaffirming western values to divide the world along ideological lines and pinpoint rivals; the third is establishing technology alliances to minimize China's access to cutting-edge technologies and secure America's high-tech leadership.

Allies as Multiplier of American Power

After Joe Biden announced his candidacy in the 2020 presidential election, a main line in his criticism of Trump was accusing Trump of abandoning allies and going it alone in foreign policy. After taking office, his administration has worked hard to repair relations with allies and return to certain forms of multilateralism. If the

Trump administration believed that the United States could win the world's respect and achieve American leadership by acting unilaterally, Biden's team holds the view that the way for the United States to consolidate its global influence and outcompete China is to restore the alliance system and rebuild the strategic credibility of the United States.

In an April 2020 article in *Foreign Affairs*, Biden noted on his campaign road, "On its own, the United States represents about a quarter of global GDP. When we join together with fellow democracies, our strength more than doubles. China can't afford to ignore more than half the global economy." (Biden, 2020, p. 71). So, the most effective way to meet the challenge coming from China is "to build a united front of U.S. allies and partners" (Biden, 2020, p. 71). In fact, the idea of uniting allies against China was already brewing in the last year of the Trump administration, though it did not come to fruit at the time. In his speech announcing the termination of the engagement policy with China in July 2020, then-Secretary of State Mike Pompeo mentioned that it would be difficult for the United States to face China's challenge alone, and that the United States would gain additional power if it worked with its allies. "Maybe it's time for a new grouping of like-minded nations, a new alliance of democracies." (Pompeo, 2020). After President Biden took the oath of office, the United States vigorously promoted the construction of a united front of allies, building and consolidating new alliances and reinvigorating old ones as well.

On March 12, 2021, the QUAD, an *ad hoc* group of four countries including the United States, Japan, India and Australia, held its first video summit and released its first leaders' statement, claiming "the global devastation wrought by COVID-19, the threat of climate change, and security challenges facing the region summon us with renewed purpose." On regional security challenges, the statement specifically referred to meeting "challenges to the rules-based maritime order in the East and South China Seas" (The White House, 2021a), clearly alluding to China. Philippine columnist Rod P. Kapunan wrote that the implication of the statement was puzzling: "China is prohibited from maintaining a strong naval power in the South China Sea, and that the security in the region is now the responsibility of [QUAD] country-members, even if they have no coastline there." (Kapunan, 2021). While the QUAD has yet to articulate itself as a new security alliance and its final form is still evolving, its words and actions show that it has become a strategic platform against China. Former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd noted that the QUAD poses a unique problem to China, as it aimed to unite the goals of a multilateral alliance, which could harden the attitude of countries across the Indo-Pacific region and beyond (Rudd, 2021). On September 24, 2021 and May 24, 2022, the QUAD heads of state held in-person summits in the United States and Japan, respectively, to reaffirm their commitment to advancing a "free and open Indo-Pacific order" (The White House, 2021b). In August and October, 2021, the United States, Japan, Australia, and India held the "Malabar Exercise 2021", a joint naval exercise, in two phases in the Philippine Sea and the Bay of Bengal. It can be seen that the four-party mechanism is playing a key role in the US strategic framework aimed at containing China.

Apart from strengthening alliances in the Indo-Pacific, Europe is another focus of Biden's alliance diplomacy. On March 25, 2021, Biden attended the European Council summit via video, reiterating his commitment to reviving U.S.-EU relations and expressing his willingness to cooperate with the European Union on "shared foreign policy interests, including China and Russia", as a way to ensure that "democracies rather than autocracies set the rules of the road" (The White House, 2021c). In mid-June 2021, Biden went to the United Kingdom for the G7 summit and NATO summit, and launched a high-intensity alliance diplomacy to reaffirm the United States' commitment to allies.

On June 10, 2021, on the eve of the G7 summit, President Biden met with British Prime Minister Boris Johnson. The two leaders signed a New Atlantic Charter, an idea proposed by American scholar John Ikenberry back in 2017 (Ikenberry, 2017, p. 8) and modeled on the World War II Atlantic Charter signed by U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill 80 years ago. The new Charter reaffirmed the two countries' commitment to their special relationship as well as common values.

While repairing the alliance system, the Biden administration used its influence to inject anti-Chinese elements into the alliance. The June 2021 G7 Summit Communiqué specifically mentioned China's "non-market policies and practices which undermine the fair and transparent operation of the global economy", and called on the group to "continue to consult on collective approaches" (Group of Seven, 2021, p. 20). The June 14 NATO Summit also stated for the first time in its Communiqué that "China's stated ambitions and assertive behavior present systemic challenges to the rules-based international order and to areas relevant to Alliance security." (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2021). This means that NATO countries see China as an adversary in terms of security.

Moreover, the Biden administration's alliance strategies against China in the Indo-Pacific and Europe are showing signs of convergence. As the host of the G7 Summit 2021, the UK invited the leaders of Australia, India, South Korea, and South Africa to the summit. As a result, the QUAD leaders gathered again on the platform of the G7 Summit, and the trend of coordination or convergence between the QUAD and the G7 and NATO and other countries on China-related issues cannot be ruled out. In this regard, John Kirton, director of the G7 Research Group at the University of Toronto, Canada, pointed out that the QUAD may reciprocate Britain's invitation by inviting it to participate in future QUAD meetings (Kirton, 2021). Kevin Rudd also spoke about the possibility of South Korea joining the QUAD and turning it into a five-party meeting (Rudd, 2021). A worrying sign is that after the 2021 NATO Summit, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Canada, and other NATO countries sent fleets or warships to the South China Sea, holding joint military exercises with the QUAD to defend the so-called freedom of navigation.

On September 15, 2021, AUKUS, a continent-spanning three-nation security partnership between the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia, convened the first summit, claiming to deepen diplomatic, security, and defense cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region to meet the challenges of the 21st century (The White House, 2021d). In particular, the three countries signed the Exchange of Naval Nuclear Propulsion Information Agreement on November 22, 2021, to provide technical and institutional support for Australia's access to nuclear-powered submarines. The Biden administration is determined to let Australia, located in the South Pacific region, play a greater role in America's Indo-Pacific strategy as a counter force against China's growing influence in the region.

Clearly, the Biden administration has deviated from its predecessor's unilateral approach in foreign policy and restored elements of multilateralism. It has spent considerable amounts of diplomatic resources trying to rebuild the alliance system, create new ad hoc alliance mechanisms, and integrate its separate European and Asia-Pacific alliance systems into a global one against China.

Values to Unite and Divide

In parallel with alliance diplomacy, the Biden administration has reinstated Western values and moral elements in its foreign policy, bringing them back to the center of foreign policy and using them to draw a line

between allies and potential rivals. The value factor that the Trump administration abandoned has returned to the Biden administration's foreign policy rhetoric and practices, recurring in the leaders' statements and communiqués of international organizations in the fields of security and global governance.

Emphasizing values such as democracy and human rights in diplomacy has always been the hallmark of the American foreign policy tradition. As Biden put it, democracy is

the wellspring of our power. It strengthens and amplifies our leadership to keep us safe in the world. It is the engine of our ingenuity that drives our economic prosperity. It is the heart of how we are and how we see the world—and how the world sees us. (Biden, 2020, p. 65)

The Biden administration's *Interim National Security Strategy Guide* also puts democracy at the forefront of U.S. diplomacy, arguing that U.S. success “begins with the revitalization of our most fundamental advantage: our democracy.” (The White House, 2021e, p. 2). In addition, Biden repeatedly emphasized the “power of example” and the importance of making the success of the United States “a beacon to other democracies” (The White House, 2021e, p. 7). The Biden administration hopes to restore the bond of values in its alliance with allies and partners and to rebuild the moral image of the United States through the emphasis on democratic values and the power of example.

Immediately after Biden took office, his administration embarked on using values as a cohesive agent to round up allies. Its diplomatic team has re-embedded ideological factors such as democracy and human rights into its foreign policy agenda when participating in various international organizations such as the QUAD, G7, and NATO. As a matter of fact, the second point of the five-point QUAD leaders' Joint Statement in March, 2021 is a high-sounding value clause:

Together, we commit to promoting a free, open rules-based order, rooted in international law to advance security and prosperity and counter threats to both in the Indo-Pacific and beyond. We support the rule of law, freedom of navigation and overflight, peaceful resolution of disputes, democratic values, and territorial integrity. (The White House, 2021a)

In a similar vein, the first article of the New Atlantic Charter signed by Biden and Boris Johnson on June 10, 2021 says that “we resolve to defend the principles, values, and institutions of democracy and open societies, which drive our own national strength and our alliances.”¹

In addition, in both the 2021 G7 Summit Communiqué and 2021 NATO Brussels Summit Communiqué there are clauses specially devoted to upholding values. The last of the six items on the agenda listed in the G7 Summit Communiqué reads as follows:

Embrace our values as an enduring foundation for success in an ever changing world. We will harness the power of democracy, freedom, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights to answer the biggest questions and overcome the greatest challenges.²

It is worth pointing out that the G7 also issued a separate Open Society Statement 2021 dedicated to promoting values. The statement begins with reaffirming their “shared belief in open societies, democratic values and multilateralism as foundations for dignity, opportunity and prosperity for all and for the responsible stewardship of our planet.” (Group of Seven, 2021). NATO's Brussels Summit Communiqué embedded a similar value clause,

¹ “The New Atlantic Charter.” June 10, 2021, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/992569/The_New_Atantic_Charter_2021.pdf.

² Group of Seven, “Carbis Bay G7 Summit Communiqué,” p. 2.

arguing that NATO “guarantees the security of our territory and our one billion citizens, our freedom, and the values we share, including individual liberty, human rights, democracy, and the rule of law.”³

Obviously, the Biden administration has deliberately highlighted shared values in its dealings with allies, requiring them to take sides. In fact, the Biden administration is not only using western values to hold allies together, it is also using them to draw a distinction from competitors and rivals. For that purpose, terms like authoritarianism and autocracy, which were popular in the Cold War years but have lost currency in much of the post-Cold War era, have come back into vogue again. On many an occasion, President Biden himself has used these heavily value-laden terms to refer to China and Russia. By framing the US-Chinese relations as a confrontation between democracies and non-democracies, the United States is redrawing the world ideological map. And by portraying itself as the embodiment of democracy and freedom, it is trying to capture the moral high ground in its relations with China.

An important sign of the great lengths the Biden administration would go to promote values in foreign policy is the so-called Summit for Democracy. In December 2021, President Biden convened a virtual “Summit for Democracy”, honoring his campaign promise and bringing together heads of state, civil society, philanthropy, and the private sector to focus on three principal themes: defending against authoritarianism, fighting corruption, and promoting respect for human rights (The White House, 2021f). From refocusing on democratic values in diplomacy to convening a Summit for Democracy, President Biden has carried his value diplomacy one step further and set a new precedent for U.S. foreign policy. Given that President Biden will co-host the second Summit for Democracy in late March, 2023 to showcase progress on these three themes, ideology and values will continue to be an important element of the Biden administration’s China policy.

Exclusive Technology Alliances

With allies and partners realigned, values reaffirmed, and rivals identified and pinpointed, the Biden administration begins to focus on another area of strength in its China policy toolbox: high-tech. U.S. high-tech policy involves two aspects—investment and decoupling, which are the two sides of the same coin. The United States is determined to do everything within its power to build on its strength and increase investment in high-tech fields and at the same time stop China from accessing its sophisticated technologies. As far as foreign policy is concerned, decoupling is the more visible aspect of the policy.

The initiative to form techno-democratic alliances between the United States and its allies began during the Trump era. In order to cope with China’s rising technological strength, the Trump administration pursued technological nationalism in its policy towards China and made attempts to unite its allies to technologically exclude China. Biden’s response has been to extend the policy started by his predecessor. The areas where the Biden team is most determined to delink from China are cutting-edge technologies.

In planning and building technological alliances with allies, the research of some US think tanks has played a big role. One example is the Center for a New American Security (CNAS). In October 2020, the Center released a report entitled “Common Code: An Alliance Framework for Democratic Technology Policy”, recommending “the world’s tech-leading democracies should spearhead the creation of a new multilateral architecture for technology policy—a technology alliance” against “authoritarian, revisionist powers.” (CNAS, 2020, p. 6). Two other think tank reports completed at about the same time came up with similar proposals. “Meeting the China

³ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, “Brussels Summit Communiqué.”

Challenge” sets out three complementary macro policy goals of the U.S. government in high-tech fields: bolstering U.S. competitiveness, target risk management, and preserving openness. It is worth noting that the report’s recommendations for achieving the goal of target risk management include adopting multi-layered risk management strategies and a “Small Yard, High Fence” philosophy, establishing new technology alliances and diversifying supply chains (Cowhey, 2020, pp. 8-10). The other report proposes four evaluation criteria for key technologies: choke points, competitive moats, security risks, and accelerants, which provides actionable criteria for implementing multi-level technical risk management. It recommends the establishment of a new coalition of democratic countries to share technological intelligence (Schmidt & Cohen, 2020).

The Biden team incorporated these ideas into his policy proposals on the 2020 campaign trail. In his aforementioned 2020 article, Biden cited 5G technology as an example of his would-be high-tech policy, calling on the United States and its democratic allies to build secure, private sector-led global 5G networks and prevent China and Russia from writing the rules of the digital age (Biden, 2020, p. 75). The March 2021 *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* repeats similar sentiments, arguing that the United States will “reinvest in retaining our scientific and technological edge and once again lead, working alongside our partners to establish the new rules and practices that will allow us to seize the opportunities that advances in technology present.” (The White House, 2021e).

Building on the growing consensus on the need to rally democracies to jointly establish a science & technology alliance against rivals, the United States and its allies have gradually come to synchronize their pace in their China policy. In most tech-related fields a Western united front begins to take shape. Various economic and technological alliances against China have come into being in the field of, to name just a few, 5G technology, artificial intelligence, quantum technology, semiconductors, lunar and deep space exploration, climate governance, and infrastructure.

In the field of infrastructure, for example, the June 2021 G7 Summit announced a Build Back Better World (B3W) partnership, a new global infrastructure financing initiative for low- and middle-income countries, to compete with China’s Belt and Road Initiative. B3W places a great emphasis on the leading role of the governments, and pushes vigorously for the formation of an “infrastructure alliance” among allies. This infrastructure financing mechanism marked the first time the G7 countries directly challenged China’s infrastructure construction plan under the Belt and Road initiative. The G7 countries propose that B3W, “a values-driven, high-standard, and transparent infrastructure partnership”, is designed not merely to assess and certify Belt and Road infrastructure projects, but to address “strategic competition from China” and mobilize the full potential of development finance tools, including private enterprises, to narrow the infrastructure need in the developing world while meeting labor, environmental, and transparency standards (The White House, 2021g). It can be seen that B3W was proposed as an exclusively Western partnership and an alternative to China’s Belt and Road initiative. It not only has a relatively complete financing plan, but also has its own standards. With its professed higher standards, the plan aims to set the rules and norms in global infrastructure. As for the negative impact of this plan, it will not only create hostile relations with China, but also undermine international cooperation as a whole (Wang, 2021).

Collaboration in infrastructure also took place at the September 2021 QUAD Summit when the United States, Japan, India, and Australia launched a new QUAD infrastructure partnership to coordinate their efforts in providing technical assistance in infrastructure. The four countries made specific references to global infrastructure standards as they emphasized “the importance of supporting open, fair, and transparent lending

practices in line with international rules and standards for major creditor countries, including on debt sustainability and accountability.” (The White House, 2021h). Clearly, from the G7 B3W partnership to the QUAD infrastructure partnership, the United States is rallying a growing number of allies and like-minded countries to counter China.

Securing supply chains for high-tech sectors is another area of concern for the Biden administration, and it has been pushing for the formation of a “democratic supply chain alliance”. About one month into his presidency, Biden signed a presidential executive order directing relevant departments to conduct a comprehensive assessment of the supply chain in the U.S. high-capacity battery, pharmaceutical, rare earth minerals and semiconductor industries within 100 days. The executive order also advises working with allies to form strong, resilient supply chains (The White House, 2021i). Given the U.S. dependence on China in the above-mentioned industries, the intention of this move was clear. It was intended to reduce the dependence of many U.S. technology industries on China’s supply chain. In the words of *Nikkei*, the United States and its allies aimed to build a “China-free” technology supply chain (Hoyama & Nakamura, 2021).

In response to the White House’s proposals, the U.S. Congress went into action. Senate Majority Leader Charles Schumer and others pushed for legislations to fund U.S. companies that are considered to be vulnerable in their supply chains, prompting U.S. companies to withdraw from the Chinese market and seek alternative suppliers to enhance U.S. supply chain resilience. *The United States Innovation and Competition Act of 2021* that came out of Schumer’s legislative efforts covers nearly all areas of economics and technology in America’s China-related policy, authorizing huge investments in research and allocating funds for companies to move their supplies chains out of China. More specifically, in August, 2022, *The CHIPS and Science Act* came into effect, providing roughly \$280 billion in new funding to boost U.S. domestic research and manufacturing of semiconductors. And in October, 2022, in a dramatic escalation of supply chain reset in semiconductors, the United States closed the door on high-end semiconductor exports to China.

Embracing its predecessor’s technological nationalism, the Biden administration has worked with allies to build an exclusive technological alliance against China. A multi-layered, ideologically-based technological alliance system has gradually formed, covering various cutting-edge technologies, with memberships restricted to so-called democracies only, and with an equal emphasis on investing in its own research and cutting off China’s access to western technologies. In so doing, the United States intends to prolong and maximize its strength in science and technology, and shape the rules and norms for the future global science and technology development and governance system. Should its plan succeed, the Biden administration reasons, the United States can expect to slow down the pace of China’s innovation and technological advance and blunt China’s rise on the scientific ladder, thus significantly alleviating the challenge China’s continuing rise poses.

Conclusion

About six months into the Biden administration, *Foreign Policy* made the following comments on its foreign policy records: “From rejoining multilateral organizations and reinvigorating alliances to donating vaccines, the Biden team has been the antithesis of its predecessor. In other areas, such as strategic competition with China, there appears to be little daylight between the two.” (Desk Team, 2021). Now it’s about two years after President Biden took office, these comments still hold true for his China policy. The Biden administration has not only inherited its predecessor’s policy of technological nationalism toward China but also has taken a more aggressive approach in uniting allies to build a broader technological barrier against China.

The Biden administration's China policy is an important manifestation of how it has exploited its "position of strength" to meet China's challenges. It has identified alliances, values, and technology as important foreign policy assets and worked to turn them into strategic advantages over China. On a more recent occasion, Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken summed up the Biden administration's strategy toward China in three words—"invest, align, compete" (Blinken, 2022). The Biden administration has prioritized relations with allies in order to multiply its strength in dealing with China. It has also trumpeted Western values in its foreign relations, not only using the cohesive power of these values to cement alliances with allies and like-minded countries but also dividing the world along ideological lines and pinpointing the challenges and threat coming from countries on the other end of the value spectrum. To add teeth to its policy, the United States has rallied allies around a multi-layered technology alliance forming a united front. In so doing, the United States can not only make it a bulwark against the proliferation of technology, but also create an international system of scientific and technological development and governance led by the United States and the West, thus extending the West's technological leadership and keeping China down in science and technology.

The exclusivity and confrontational nature of the Biden administration's China policies carries great pernicious effects. As many European countries feared in the 2021 Munich Security Report, the US current China policy of confrontation will not only undermine international cooperation on issues of common concern, but may also become self-fulfilling prophecies, allowing the world to slide into division and return to a new Cold War (Bunde et al., 2021). The United States has forced allies to choose sides, and it has built ideological and technological walls against China. Not only has the United States driven a wedge between China and its allies, but more seriously, it risks plunging the world into Cold War-like confrontations.

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