

The Biden administration is on a path toward strategic insolvency

Michael Clarke
June 30 2022

Note: This article appeared in *The National Interest* on June 30 2022.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine continues to have ramifications well beyond the immediate European security environment. Not least of these is the manner in which Russian adventurism is affecting the [evolution](#) of the Biden administration's defence and strategic policy. For [some](#) commentators, the effect of Vladimir Putin's war on [US strategic policy](#) amounts to a distraction from what is the main game: strategic competition with China to, in President Joe Biden's [phrase](#), 'win the 21st century.' According to this view, the Biden administration's [swift](#) rallying of allied condemnation, economic sanctioning of Russia, and [arming](#) of Ukraine has effectively contained the Russian challenge. It should, from this perspective, permit it to devote strategic attention to the China challenge.

However, despite the apparent success of the administration's response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, there is a concern among many American Asia-watchers that the Biden administration's attention will remain dangerously divided between Asia and Europe as long as the war in Ukraine [drags on](#), and Putin remains unchastened.

This view is not without merit. The trend toward divided strategic attention has been noticeable for some time. It was apparent prior to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, for example, when a Pentagon spokesman in late January 2022 [rejected](#) the implication from a journalist that the United States could not in fact 'walk and chew gum at the same time' on Russia and China. More significantly, the trend is evident in hints about key strategy documents.

The two-page 'fact sheet' on the still-classified National Defense Strategy (NDS) [released](#) by the Pentagon on March 28, 2022, seemed to signal that the administration would focus equal attention on both Russia and China. It clearly identified 'detering aggression' and 'detering strategic attacks against the United States, Allies, and partners,' with prioritisation of 'the PRC challenge in the Indo-Pacific' and the 'Russia challenge' in Europe, as its central objective. This followed media [reporting](#) in early March that the Russian invasion had prompted a 'rework' of the NDS. Indeed, President Biden's [State of the Union](#) address on March 1 spent considerable time detailing how Russia's invasion of Ukraine constituted the world's drift toward a 'battle between autocracy and democracy.'

The shadow of the war in Ukraine also looms over the administration's delayed and yet-to-be-released National Security Strategy (NSS). Bloomberg [reported](#) on June 3 that the NSS 'is now being substantially rewritten to reflect the ways the world has changed since the war began,' and to emphasise 'the importance of both Europe and Asia to US national security interests.'

Secretary of State Antony Blinken's May 26 [speech](#) on the administration's China policy provided a hint as to how this emphasis on both Europe and Asia might be handled in the NSS. He [asserted](#) that while

'Russian President Vladimir Putin poses a clear and present threat' to the existing international order, China remained the 'most serious long-term challenge' to that order. This was because it was 'the only country with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do it.' This was also consistent with earlier [comments](#) by National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan that 'there is a certain level of integration and a symbiosis in the strategy we are pursuing in Europe and the strategy we're pursuing in the Indo-Pacific,' and the administration's March 3, 2021, [Interim National Security Guidance's](#) relative prioritisation of the Russian and Chinese challenges.

While the administration's ambition to 'walk and chew gum' in the European and Asian strategic theatres is now clearly stated, the same cannot be said for how it believes that it can meet them. The administration's approach to date in fact appears to rest more on hopeful assumptions rather than upon the consideration of the necessities for a 'solvent' grand strategy. Strategic solvency, as Walter Lippman famously [argued](#), 'consists in bringing into balance, with a comfortable surplus of power in reserve, the nation's commitments and the nation's power.' Central to achieving such solvency is the alignment of ends and means and the prioritisation of challenges and threats to be met.

A central hopeful assumption by the Biden administration concerns Washington's European allies. The administration's ambition to focus simultaneously on Russia and China, in part, rests on the hope that finally stung into action by Putin's aggression they will [begin](#) to 'undertake sweeping investments to provide for their own military defence and expand them over time.' Washington may then finally be able to let its NATO allies bear the [predominant burden](#) in confronting and containing future Russian aggression with 'fewer forward-deployed US troops and assets' and turn its strategic attention to Asia.

Yet this hope appears a forlorn one. Washington's provision of military aid to Ukraine of some \$26 billion [dwarfs](#) that of its NATO allies by a considerable margin. This raises the possibility that as the war in Ukraine grinds on, Washington may in fact be drawn in deeper through the provision of greater military, economic, and diplomatic assistance to ensure that Kyiv is not defeated. This would distract attention not only from the Asian theatre but also [increase](#) the risks of [direct military escalation](#) with Moscow.

The administration's emphasis on simultaneously combating Russian and Chinese challenges in both European and Asian strategic theatres also raises the spectre of strategic over-extension. Indeed, while some have [asserted](#) that the current era amounts to a 'second Cold War' and that the United States should draw lessons from that 'long twilight struggle' (as President John Kennedy described it), the Biden administration could do well to reflect on some of the basic distinctions between then and now.

During the Cold War, Washington competed with Moscow well beyond the geographical arenas that George F. Kennan had [originally](#) identified as necessary for it to contest. But it 'did so more out of psychological concerns than material ones, worried that any Soviet foothold that went unchallenged, even in a country that might seem peripheral to vital US national interests, could set in motion a fundamental reversal of Washington's strategic position.' Such security commitments, Secretary of State Dean Acheson [analogised](#) after the Korean War, were 'like a bank account' that the Soviet Union 'presented a check' to, and to 'their great surprise, the teller paid.' Tellingly, Acheson continued that '[t]he important thing was that the check was paid. The importance will be nothing if the next check is not paid and if the bank account is not kept strong and sufficient to cover all checks which are drawn upon it.'

The United States was [able](#) to bear the costs of this strategic ill-discipline 'because it was ascending relative to its competitor—a competitor that, at its height, had an economy that was only about two-fifths as its own.' At present, however, the United States faces two tests of its security commitments at either end of the Eurasian continent at a time when it faces what some have described as a [crisis of democracy](#) at home and an economy [heading](#) 'like Wile E. Coyote' off a cliff, and into recession. In this situation, it would seem imprudent for the administration to issue blank checks for adversaries to cash.

Yet the administration appears at risk of edging closer to such a position. While it has resisted pressure to become more directly engaged in Ukraine's defence by being mindful of the risks of escalation, it has significantly strengthened its rhetorical commitment to Kyiv. In November 2021, Washington and Kyiv signed

the [US-Ukraine Charter on Strategic Partnership](#), which stated that the United States commits to ‘maintaining sanctions ... and applying other relevant measures’ until Russia restores Ukraine’s territorial integrity. With respect to Taiwan, President Biden has [now](#) made numerous statements that suggest the discarding of the policy of ‘strategic ambiguity’ in favour of ‘strategic clarity’. Most recently when asked during a [joint](#) press conference with Japanese prime minister Kishida Fumio on 23 May whether he was ‘willing to get involved militarily to defend Taiwan,’ Biden responded in the affirmative, noting ‘that’s the commitment we made.’ The rationale of [advocates](#) for strategic clarity is straightforward: given that ‘the odds of a Chinese blockade, missile strike, or invasion grow with each passing year,’ *only* a clear and definitive statement of US intention and resolve will ‘dissuade’ China from ‘miscalculation.’

But to succeed, as [Thomas Schelling](#) famously argued, deterrence requires *both* the credible ability to punish or deny a potential aggressor and a credible assurance to the aggressor that its most feared outcome will not occur. On each count, there is reason to question Washington’s ability to attain both of these conditions on its current policy trajectory vis-à-vis Ukraine and Taiwan. In the Taiwan case, a recent RAND study [concluded](#) that the United States would face great difficulty in combating a Chinese economic blockade of Taiwan, let alone a full-scale invasion. This is due in no small measure to the People’s Liberation Army’s acquisition and [deployment](#) of new precision strike capabilities. Diplomatically, meanwhile, Biden’s repeated statements that it will support Taiwan militarily combined with recent US [efforts](#) to enlist its Asian allies in this cause will arguably raise the spectre in Beijing of its [worst-case scenario](#) in which the United States not only definitively abrogates the One China policy but [solidifies](#) a strategic ‘encirclement’ of China.

A third problematic issue is that the administration’s recent rhetorical framing of the Russian and [Chinese challenges](#) to the existing international order as one of ‘autocracies versus democracy’ is not necessarily the rallying cry the Beltway thinks it is. For one thing, the narrative is counter-productive as an organising principle for strategy. It ignores the fact that much of the world [beyond](#) Washington’s immediate allies remains lukewarm on sanctioning Russia and has positively [avoided](#) taking sides in the new era of ‘strategic competition’ between the United States and China. For another thing, it [presents](#) ‘an impossible moral bar that, when flunked, earns the US a reputation for hypocrisy’ and ‘makes the classic Chinese offer to third countries—economic patronage without moral strings—ever more tempting.’

This self-created hypocrisy trap will be too easily sprung. For instance, it looms over President Biden’s upcoming visit to Riyadh to visit Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman. Here, the administration’s self-proclaimed role as a champion of democracy and human rights looks set to take a firm [backseat](#) to more tangible and immediate interests in settling instability in global energy markets after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and extracting ‘an oil production hike to ease prices at the pump’ at home.

Finally, the administration’s efforts to prioritise Asia and the challenge by China have clearly been hamstrung—and have been seen as such in the region—by the flow-on effects of Russian adventurism. The administration has spoken of China being the ‘pacing challenge’ and the only peer competitor capable of mounting a direct and sustained challenge to the existing international order. Yet its actions simply don’t match this rhetoric. While the United States is ‘shovelling billions of dollars into arms for Ukraine,’ many Asian leaders are [mindful](#) that ‘the Biden administration only managed to pledge a measly \$150 million for investment in Southeast Asia after a summit of regional leaders in Washington.’ And US military deployments in Asia—where approximately 10 to 15 percent of US naval and air assets are [deployed](#) in the Western Pacific—tend to belie the sense of commitment and urgency that has been signalled by the administration’s rhetoric on the challenge posed by China.

A coherent strategy requires prioritisation and trade-offs between not only means and ends but also core regions of geographic focus. However, the evidence to date suggests that the administration is unable or unwilling to make such hard but necessary choices. To be sure, the Biden administration still has some scope for a course correction, but the time to do that—not to mention the political will to achieve it—is increasingly short.

Professor Michael Clarke is an Adjunct Professor at the Australia-China Relations Institute at the University of Technology Sydney.