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# Continuity or Change: U.S.-China Policy Under President Biden

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On February 10, 2021, newly elected President Joseph Biden directed the Department of Defense to conduct a China policy review. This review had two objectives: One, conduct a baseline assessment of China-related programs, policies, and processes. Two, provide the Secretary of Defense with a set of priorities and recommendations.<sup>1</sup> That review has since been completed with serious implications for allies and partner nations, and its findings remain classified. Even so, there are sufficient available insights to help discern whether Biden's China strategy marks a change or continuation of current competitive approaches.

Whatever direction the Biden administration takes on China, the findings of this recent policy review will heavily influence the next National Defense Strategy (NDS). The last one called out competition with China and Russia as the

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<sup>1</sup> Secretary of Defense Directive on China Task Force Recommendations, June 9, 2021, <https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Releases/Release/Article/2651534/secretary-of-defense-directive-on-china-task-force-recommendations/>.

principal security priority - China often since being referred to as the pacing threat.<sup>2</sup> This sentiment, and a desire to revise the 2018 strategy, were repeated on January 19 by Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin before the Senate Armed Services Committee during his confirmation hearing.<sup>3</sup> Given past precedent, a new National Defense Strategy can be expected early in 2022. Until then, we must infer this administration's China approach from its responses to crises, budgets proposed, statements made, and the people chosen to be responsible for this task.

The China policy review in Secretary Austin's words also includes addressing a "say-do" gap on delivering actions in the competition with China. Addressing this gap will be the job of Ely Ratner, who also led the team of policy experts that conducted the review. At a June 16 hearing before the Senate Armed Services Committee, Mr. Ratner's comments pointed to a continuation of competitive strategies relative to China.<sup>4</sup> At that hearing two themes stood out: one, a focus on deterrence by denial, which indicates an emphasis on forward presence; two, a troubling tendency to diminish the urgency of China's rising threat. Hopefully, this policy review marks a transition from analysis to action, and not an ongoing review that could very well cause organizational paralysis - delaying closing of the very 'say-do' gap the Secretary targeted.

Mitigating the potential 'paralysis by analysis' is the fact that Mr. Ratner has a long history of policy work and personal connections that can facilitate prompt action in his new role. Nominated to lead the Defense Department's Asia and Pacific Security Affairs office, he will be responsible for military-to-military relations and security cooperation, while also wielding significant influence on military strategies and planning. In this job his personal connections with the White House and State Department are critical. First is Kurt Campbell, who he has known since their time together at the State Department between 2011 and 2012. This was an especially critical relationship given Mr. Campbell's role as "Indo-

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<sup>2</sup> Jim Mattis, "Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy," Department of Defense, pp. 2 and 4, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Mallory Shelbourne, "SECDEF Nominee Austin Affirms Threat From China, Will 'Update' National Defense Strategy," USNI News, January 19, 2021, <https://news.usni.org/2021/01/19/secdef-nominee-austin-affirms-threat-from-china-will-update-national-defense-strategy>.

<sup>4</sup> Statement of Dr. Ely Ratner Nominee to be Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs Senate Armed Services Committee, June 16, 2021, [https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/hearings/nominations\\_-krass-jones-ratner-skelly-berger?rid=78393](https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/hearings/nominations_-krass-jones-ratner-skelly-berger?rid=78393).

Pacific Coordinator” on the National Security Council.<sup>5</sup> At State Department, Mr. Ratner will be working with another old colleague, Daniel Kritenbrink, who is nominated to be Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs.<sup>6</sup> However, Mr. Ratner’s personal connection to the President will be most consequential in driving action on China policy. Their relationship goes back to 2001 when Mr. Ratner was a staffer on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee which at the time Senator Biden chaired. Then from 2015 to 2017, Mr. Ratner was a personal aide to Vice President Biden.<sup>7</sup> However, it is unknown what personal connections Mr. Ratner has with the intelligence community. These relationships will prove critical in informing the execution of policy.

Since President Biden’s inauguration there have been several events in Asia that underscore the likely direction Mr. Ratner will be leading Defense’s China policy. For one, there has been a steady stream of nearly monthly Taiwan Strait transits and freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea by Navy warships.<sup>8</sup> Such challenges to the Chinese Communist Party’s excessive maritime claims could be indicative of a commitment to a more forceful military presence. This despite large Chinese air and naval exercises around Taiwan – notably, the largest recorded on April 12, was comprised of 18 fighters, four bombers and two tanker aircraft.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, the President’s March 3 Interim National Security Strategy acknowledges the primacy of the China threat while emphasizing dialogue through such forums as the Maritime Military Consultative Agreement (MMCA).<sup>10</sup> The next bilateral MMCA with the Peoples Liberation Army should have occurred by the time of this writing. Any delay or cancellation

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<sup>5</sup> Kathryn Putz, “Kurt Campbell and Biden Administration’s China Policy,” U.S. China Perception Monitor, January 27, 2021, <https://uscnpm.org/2021/01/27/kurt-campbell-and-biden-administrations-china-policy/>.

<sup>6</sup> The Briefing Room, “President Biden Announces his Intent to Nominate Key Members for the Department of State,” The White House, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/03/26/president-biden-announces-his-intent-to-nominate-key-members-for-the-department-of-state/>.

<sup>7</sup> Lara Seligman, “Biden taps former aide as top Pentagon adviser on China,” Politico, January 19, 2021, <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/politics/biden-taps-former-aide-as-top-pentagon-adviser-on-china/ar-BB1cTyM1>.

<sup>8</sup> Sam LaGrone, “Destroyer Makes Sixth Taiwan Strait Transit During Biden Administration,” USNI News, June 22, 2021, <https://news.usni.org/2021/06/22/destroyer-makes-sixth-taiwan-strait-transit-during-biden-administration>.

<sup>9</sup> Steve Holland and Andrea Shalal, “White House Says China’s Moves Around Taiwan ‘Potentially Destabilizing’,” Reuters, April 9, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/white-house-says-chinas-moves-around-taiwan-potentially-destabilizing-2021-04-09/>.

<sup>10</sup> Joseph Biden, “Interim National Security Strategic Guidance,” March 3, 2021, pp. 13, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>.

could be a test of this interim guidance. Notably, he last MMCA in December 2020 was a Chinese no-show.<sup>11</sup> Mr. Ratner's policy review ostensibly was meant to also rationalize the dichotomy of engagement while maintaining a muscular forward naval presence that enables effective diplomacy.

The China policy review that was led by Defense leadership had a broad scope and likely coincided with similar reviews in the State Department. Additionally, a global posture review of military basing was conducted at the same time, and its findings will undoubtedly inform recommendations of the China policy review.<sup>12</sup> Related to this posture review was a June 15 report that Defense is considering establishing a permanent Pacific naval task force and a named military operation to facilitate and sustain resources in competition with China.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, given emphasis in the interim National Security Strategy on allies and partners, little has been formally discussed on how security assistance will figure in the administration's revised China approach. However, the President's fiscal year 2022 budget does not indicate any meaningful increases in this regard given the disappointing funding of the Pacific Deterrence Initiative.<sup>14</sup> Meant to resource an enhanced competition with and deterrence of China, of the funds proposed for this initiative, only eight percent met the combatant commander's request. Conversely, the lion's share of requested funds is directed to already planned procurements of ships and aircraft that will not be seen in Asia for several years. Helpful yes, but not the resources the combatant commander needs now.

As Congress and the President work out the details of the next budget, events are playing out that will challenge the administration's apparent China policy assumptions. First, is the belief that there is still time to invest in future capabilities at the expense of near-term capacity growth in new ships and aircraft. This assumption was most evident in the budget priorities preferentially

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<sup>11</sup> Steven Stashwick, "PLA No-Shows US-China Maritime Safety Talks," *The Diplomat*, December 18, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/12/pla-no-shows-us-china-maritime-safety-talks/>.

<sup>12</sup> Statement by Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III on the Initiation of a Global Force Posture Review, February 4, 2021, <https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Releases/Release/Article/2494189/statement-by-secretary-of-defense-loyd-j-austin-iii-on-the-initiation-of-a-glo/>.

<sup>13</sup> Lara Seligman, "Pentagon considering permanent naval task force to counter China in the Pacific," *Politico*, June 15, 2021, <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/06/15/pentagon-navy-pacific-task-force-china-494605>.

<sup>14</sup> Joe Gould, "Lawmakers champion China Deterrence Fund, But Not Biden's Version," *Defense News*, <https://www.defensenews.com/congress/2021/06/03/lawmakers-champion-china-deterrence-fund-but-not-bidens-version/>.

resourcing research and development while cutting procurement. Getting this wrong now is risky - China has not been deterred from abrogating international agreements regarding Hong Kong, increasing military operations around Taiwan or the Senkaku Islands. As the U.S. forward military presence has diminished relative to China's, the likelihood that today's military will be able to sustain deterrence let alone assure allies in a crisis is questionable. Second, that a new administration and fresh approach can engender a favorable response from Beijing along common interests. So far, the record is disappointing for any type of U.S.-China reset. In fact beginning with a March 18 contentious bilateral summit in Alaska, little common ground has been seen on either climate change, increasingly bellicose rhetoric from Beijing (e.g. President Xi's speech commemorating the 100th anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party on June 1)<sup>15</sup> or any change in coercive behavior in the South China Sea (e.g. the massing of hundreds of maritime militia and Chinese Coast Guard vessels in Philippine waters,<sup>16</sup> and harassment of survey vessels in Malaysian waters).<sup>17</sup> Amidst such a clearly undeterred and unaccommodating China, any renewed engagement must avoid signaling weakness or irresolution, which could trigger a miscalculation on the part of the Chinese Communist Party further inciting already high tensions in East and Southeast Asia.

That said, how the new administration reacts to a crisis before a new NDS is announced will unequivocally signal continuity or change in U.S. China policies. As mentioned, the administration has sustained freedom of navigation and Taiwan Straits naval transits, and there are several events coming that will provide a pretext for a Chinese test of the administration. For instance, the redeployment of the only carrier strike group west of the dateline until the end of the summer to support the U.S.'s withdrawal from Afghanistan. This visibly diminishes aircraft carrier presence in East Asia; the most visible statement of U.S. national power.<sup>18</sup> Historic levels of French and British naval presence in the region may somewhat

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<sup>15</sup> Emily Feng, "China Celebrates Its Communist Party's Centennial With Spectacle, Saber Rattling," NPR, July 1, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/07/01/1012053737/china-celebrates-its-communist-partys-centennial-with-spectacle-saber-rattling>.

<sup>16</sup> "Caught on Camera: Two Dozen Militia Boats at Whitsun Reef Identified," Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, April 21, 2021, <https://amti.csis.org/caught-on-camera-two-dozen-militia-boats-at-whitsun-reef-identified/>.

<sup>17</sup> "Contest At Kasawari: Another Malaysian Gas Project Faces Pressure," Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, July 7, 2021, <https://amti.csis.org/contest-at-kasawari-another-malaysian-gas-project-faces-pressure/>.

<sup>18</sup> Sam LaGrone, "Japan-based USS Ronald Reagan Now in the Middle East to Cover Afghanistan Withdrawal," USNI News, June 25, 2021, <https://news.usni.org/2021/06/25/japan-based-uss-ronald-reagan-now-in-the-middle-east-to-cover-afghanistan-withdrawal>.

mitigate this gap through the end of August.<sup>19</sup> Yet another example is the conduct of the long awaited Large Scale Exercise by the Navy this summer - the largest naval exercises in a decade.<sup>20</sup> China could use this exercise as a pretext for conducting similar challenges as Russia did in June when it sent air and naval platforms to conduct anti-aircraft carrier exercises near Hawaii.<sup>21</sup> Hopefully, veterans of the failed 2012 Scarborough standoff will not relent in the face of new Chinese challenges; during that 2012 crisis Campbell was Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, Kritenbrink was at the U.S. Embassy in Beijing, and Ratner was the State Department's China desk.<sup>22</sup> That said, these veterans may be surprised at China's confidence and willingness to assert itself today compared to when they were last in government more than four years ago.

The China policy review and public statements by the new Biden team belie a continuation of past policies with minor tweaking dressed in new language. Notable being emphasis on allies and partners in restraining China's worst behaviors. But budget proposals indicate a business-as-usual approach that will not close the 'say-do' gap the Secretary of Defense aims to close on military competition with China. Worse, until greater emphasis is given to resourcing a forward presence in the Western Pacific and procuring greater numbers of aircraft and warships, China will continue to pull ahead in the competition with the U.S.

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<sup>19</sup> Brad Lendon, "Britain is sending a huge naval force through some of the most tense waters in Asia," CNN, April 27, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/04/26/europe/uk-aircraft-carrier-strike-group-asia-intl-hnk-scli-ml/index.html>.

<sup>20</sup> Tom Batchelor, "U.S. Deploys One-Third of Pacific Submarine Fleet for Major Naval Exercise," Newsweek, June 4, 2021, <https://www.newsweek.com/us-pacific-submarine-fleet-naval-exercise-pearl-harbor-1597508>.

<sup>21</sup> Edmund DeMarche, "Russian Navy Conducts Massive Drills in Pacific Before Biden-Putin Meeting," Fox News, June 16, 2021, <https://www.foxnews.com/world/russian-navy-conducts-massive-drills-in-pacific-before-biden-putin-meeting-report>.

<sup>22</sup> Michael Green, Kathleen Hicks, Zack Cooper, John Schaus And Jake Douglas, "Counter-Coercion Series: Scarborough Shoal Standoff," Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, May 22, 2017, <https://amti.csis.org/counter-co-scarborough-standoff/>.



*Mr. Brent Sadler joined the Heritage Foundation after a 26-year Navy career with numerous operational tours on nuclear powered submarines, personal staffs of senior Defense Department leaders, and as a military diplomat in Asia. As a senior research fellow, Mr. Sadler's focus is on maritime security and the technologies shaping our future maritime forces, especially the Navy.*

*Mr. Sadler is a native of Springfield, Virginia, and a 1994 graduate with honors of the United States Naval Academy with a degree in Systems Engineering (robotics) and a minor in Japanese. As a 2004 Olmsted Scholar in Tokyo, Japan, he studied at Keio University, Jochi University and the United Nations University. He has a M.A. from Jochi University and M.S. from National War College where he graduated with distinction in 2011 receiving several writing and research awards.*

*In 2011, he established the Navy Asia Pacific Advisory Group (NAPAG), providing regionally informed advice directly to Chief of Naval Operations' (CNO). He again served on the CNO's personal staff in 2015-2016, playing a key role in developing the Defense Department's Third Offset.*

*At Pacific Command from 2012-2015, he held numerous key positions. As lead for Maritime Strategy and Policy, he incorporated all 10 Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) into the first regional maritime domain awareness forum; and, was instrumental in the eventual passage of the \$500 million dollar Maritime Security Initiative. As Special Advisor on Japan, and a Council of Foreign Relations International Affairs Fellow in Tokyo, he played a key role in revising the U.S. and Japan Defense Guidelines. As Deputy Director Strategic Synchronization Group, he oversaw a think-tank like body of over 30 advisors and analysts. Mr. Sadler led the Commander's Rebalance Task Force coordinating execution of the President's Defense Strategic Guidance—Rebalance to the Asia-Pacific resulting in over \$12 billion USD of additional monies budgeted in fiscal years 2013 through 2015 during a time of fiscal austerity.*

*Following his final tour on CNO's staff, Mr. Sadler returned to Asia as Senior Defense Official, Defense and Naval Attaché in Malaysia. During his tenure he played a key role in coordinating responses to the USS McCain collision in August 2017, opened several politically sensitive ports and airfields to U.S. forces, oversaw unprecedented expansion of U.S. military relations, and steadied relations during the historic May 2018 national elections ushering in an opposition party for the first time since independence.*

*His final Navy assignment was China Branch of Navy Staff at the Pentagon.*

8 Mr. Brent Sadler.

*He is married to the former Yulia Polyakova and has two daughters: Sophia and Vivienne.*

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