**American security strategy**

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Tuesday, Oct 18, 2022

In its National Security Strategy released by the White House on October 12, the Biden administration asserts: “The PRC [People’s Republic of China] is the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do it. Beijing has ambitions to create an enhanced sphere of influence in the Indo-Pacific and to become the world’s leading power”.

In the National Security Strategy of Biden’s presidency which was long awaited, the same tone and tenor has been directed at Beijing as the one adopted by Biden’s predecessor, Donald Trump. How the US threat perception has shifted from Afghanistan or Al-Qaeda to China and the Indo-Pacific region can be gauged from the fact how much the new strategy has focused on these new challenges to US global security and strategic interests. For example, the policy document has cited the word ‘Taliban’ only once, Al-Qaeda three times and Afghanistan four times. In contrast, in the latest policy, Beijing/China/PRC has been mentioned a total of 60 times while Indo-Pacific has come under discussion 34 times.

Somewhat understandably and notwithstanding the recent flurry of bilateral visits between US and Pakistani officials, the policy document has completely ignored its former ally as Pakistan or Islamabad has not been mentioned a single time. Biden’s recent remarks about Pakistan as “one of the most dangerous nations in the world” and regarding the country’s nukes are a grim reminder that US-Pakistan ties are replete with frictions. And so is the case with the Middle East, which is discussed 11 times, but the primary focus of the new policy is the Indo-Pacific region.

In contrast to this latest line of thinking where China appears to be a key threat, in the first National Security Strategy of the Obama administration unveiled in 2010, the document had mentioned ‘Taliban’ three times, Al-Qaeda 25 times, Afghanistan 20 times, Pakistani 15 times, and China only 10 times. Even the tone and tenor were vastly different regarding China than it has been in recent years.

For example, the policy document of the Obama era stated that the US “will continue to deepen our cooperation with other 21st century centers of influence – including China, India, and Russia – on the basis of mutual interests and mutual respect”. The same document further stated that “we will continue to pursue a positive, constructive, and comprehensive relationship with China” and that Washington welcomes Beijing to play a central role in partnership with the US and the international community to work towards resolving pressing global challenges including economic stagnation, climate change and non-proliferation.

However, the latest 48-page policy document unequivocally asserts that Beijing has been on the path to become a challenge for the US. This is an indication how the US threat perception has transformed about all these actors and that the US now considers China a critical security threat to its unrivaled global hegemony. In the 2017 National Security Strategy of the Trump administration, it was stated that “for decades, US policy was rooted in the belief that support for China’s rise and for its integration into the post-war international order would liberalize China”. However, in contrast to these expectations, the document opined that Beijing expanded “its power at the expense of the sovereignty of others. It is building the most capable and well-funded military in the world, after our own….China seeks to displace the United States in the Indo-Pacific region, expand the reaches of its state-driven economic model, and reorder the region in its favor”.

Hence, the Trump administration was increasingly aggressive by imposing penalties ranging from 10-25 per cent on $250 billion worth of Chinese exports and banning Chinese chipmaker Fujian Jinhua Integrated Circuit Company from buying US components without a special licence from the Commerce Department. During his four years in office (2017-2021), former president Trump abandoned the 45-year-old foreign policy which aimed to persuade Beijing to become more like the West. To the surprise of many observers, the Biden administration has largely followed Trump’s lead, keeping US policy towards China on a more competitive, if not outright confrontational footing.

China is viewed as ‘challenging’ US global supremacy. This perception was formally reflected in former president Obama’s policies to ‘contain’ China such as the ‘Pivot to Asia’ and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). These reinforce the military reality where major US bases already surround China to the east and west, coupled with a strong presence of the US Pacific fleet ‘policing’ some of the world’s busiest and fastest growing trade routes catalysed by China’s rising prosperity.

One major departure from Trump’s approach is that President Biden has strengthened existing alliances such as Nato and has vastly expanded US influence by carving out new strategic alliances with ‘likeminded democracies’. The fact has been aptly acknowledged in the latest National Security Strategy as it boasts of: “from the Indo-Pacific Quad (Australia, India, Japan, United States) to the U.S.-EU Trade and Technology Council, from AUKUS (Australia, United Kingdom, United States) to I2-U2 (India, Israel, UAE, United States), we are creating a latticework of strong, resilient, and mutually reinforcing relationships that prove democracies can deliver for their people and the world”.

On June 1, 2019 the US Department of Defense officially published the ‘Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships and Promoting a Networked Regio’ (commonly referred to as Indo-Pacific Strategy Report). The document minces no words by stating that “the Indo-Pacific is the single most consequential region for America’s future”. The report asserts that the region comprises over half of the world’s population and among the 10 largest standing armies in the world, seven reside in the Indo-Pacific; and six countries in the region possess nuclear weapons. This report cites ‘China’ 91 times and has labelled it as revisionist power.

There are numerous reports of think tanks and academic studies focusing on the unabated Sino-US rivalry and how it could impact countries in different regions. In their latest book on the subject titled ‘Danger Zone: The Coming Conflict with China’, Michael Beckley and Hal Brands argue that “Power transition theory holds that war is likely when a rising country threatens to overtake an established country”. They state the Sino-US competition is entering a decisive phase and “the risk of war is highest and decisions made or not made will shape world politics for decades”.

In his book ‘Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides’s Trap?’, Graham Allison of Harvard University examines the records of 16 cases in which an ascending power challenged an established power in the past 500 years. He argues that war broke out in 12 out of these 16 scenarios. We hope that ,while both Biden and Xi are on the path to make their respective countries great again, sanity must prevail and instead of collision there is an effort towards collaboration and mutual co-existence which is not only necessary for Americans and Chinese citizens but also for the global community at large which is faced with the existential threat of climate change.

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