

Opinion **US foreign policy**

Spectre of three wars poses danger to America's dominance

Russia, China and Iran are making military threats that demand a response from Washington

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For decades, American military planning was based on the idea that the US should be able to fight [two wars](#), in different parts of the world, simultaneously. But even the gloomiest strategists did not plan for three wars at the same time.

The administration of Joe Biden, however, is currently facing militarised crises in Europe, Asia and the Middle East. Collectively, they amount to the biggest challenge to America's global power since the end of the cold war.

American officials have [briefed](#) that Russia is planning an invasion of Ukraine “as soon as early 2022.” Meanwhile, Lloyd Austin, America's defence secretary, has [warned](#) that China's military manoeuvres near Taiwan look like rehearsals for a full-scale invasion. Iran may also be [weeks away](#) from creating enough fissile material to manufacture a nuclear weapon — an outcome the US has spent decades trying to stop.

Some analysts worry America may now be facing a co-ordinated global assault by revisionist powers. Carl Bildt, former prime minister of Sweden and international diplomat, [warns](#) that policymakers should contemplate the possibility of simultaneous invasions of Taiwan and Ukraine. “Taken together, these two acts of conquest would fundamentally shift the global balance of power”, he says, sounding the death knell for a world order that has “underpinned global peace for decades”.

It seems unlikely that Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin are talking directly about co-

Tehran, there is a degree of shared analysis and watchfulness. The governments of China, Russia and Iran all complain that they have been targeted for “regime change” by Washington. They all have ambitions to dominate their regions. And they all justify their ambitions by claiming kinship with peoples beyond their national boundaries.

The Xi government insists it is China's national destiny to “reunify” the motherland by absorbing Taiwan. Putin [argues](#) that a “genocide” is being committed against Russian speakers in Ukraine and that it is Moscow's duty to protect them. The Iranian government claims to be the protector of Islam across the world and has [used](#) Shia Muslims, beyond its borders, as proxy warriors.

After the chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan over the summer, America is looking weak. That increases the temptation for Russia, China and Iran to try to redress old grievances, or push forward with long-held ambitions.

The revisionist powers in Asia, Europe and the Middle East will each be watching developments on other continents. Unopposed attacks on [Ukraine](#) or Taiwan would signal the fundamental shift in global power that Bildt and others worry about. But US power and credibility could also decline through a series of less spectacular accommodations that collectively signal that America is backing down.

There is already alarm in parts of Europe at the Biden administration's talk of reaching a new security [“accommodation”](#) with Russia in Europe. If the US gives ground in the face of Russian threats to Ukraine, China may be encouraged to ramp up its intimidation of Taiwan and Iran may step on the nuclear accelerator. America's allies, crucial to Washington's global reach, may also lose heart and start to peel off.

The White House is alert to these dangers. It knows it must pick its battles — or risk becoming dangerously overcommitted. A strong US stand in Europe, Asia or the Middle East could help to restore American deterrence across the world. But where, if anywhere, should America flex its muscles?

The scale of the threat points to China. The scale of the provocation points to Russia. The smaller scale of risk points to Iran — which is (so far) a non-nuclear power. In strategic terms, the Biden administration's instinct is to concentrate on China as the only plausible challenger to America's role as the world's sole superpower. Biden has [suggested](#) that the US would defend Taiwan, if it is attacked — but has not made

tangling with Russian or Chinese forces. But Biden, like Barack Obama and Donald Trump before him, is reluctant to get involved in another war in the Middle East.

The Biden administration will not explicitly take the military option off the table in any of these three conflicts. But the US is most likely to rely on economic and diplomatic weapons. The kind of stringent US economic [sanctions](#) already deployed against Iran could be used against Russia or China — in the event of attacks on Ukraine or Taiwan.

That would not mean the beginning of world war three. But it might mean the end of globalisation.

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