

Opinion **Global Insight**

## Ukraine crisis saddles Washington with Indo-Pacific dilemma

Asia allies fear Biden administration will be distracted from newly minted regional strategy

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Kabul, August 2021: Afghanistan was meant to show that the US was serious about the Indo-Pacific but its pullout 'ended up being read as a demonstration of weakness' © EPA-EFE

**Kathrin Hille** in Taipei 8 HOURS AGO

Just as the US tries to convince its Asian allies that it is focused on their region and ready to face the challenge from China, it is being pulled into a [security crisis](#) in Europe.

In capitals from Canberra to Tokyo, the spectre of a Russian attack on Ukraine has diverted attention from the Indo-Pacific strategy — which the Biden administration [published](#) this month — to the fact that the US is again focusing its efforts elsewhere.

“No region will be of more consequence to the world and to everyday Americans than the Indo-Pacific,” the strategy proclaims, adding that the Biden administration “has made historic strides to restore American leadership” in the region. But government officials and analysts fret that the Ukraine crisis will render those pronouncements empty.

“Asian countries have been here before: amid distractions in Europe and Middle East, rebalancing to Asia hasn’t happened,” says Ashley Townshend, director for foreign policy and defence at the US Studies Centre at the University of Sydney.

A decade ago, then secretary of state Hillary Clinton [pledged](#) that the US would pivot to Asia — now source of 60 per cent of global gross domestic product and home to more than half of the world’s population — and to the only rival to the US as global

superpower, China. But as the US became bogged down in conflicts in the Middle East and Afghanistan, it has been slow to make good on that promise.

Meanwhile, China's rapid modernisation of its armed forces has undermined US military dominance in the region.

The Trump administration acknowledged the problem by declaring China an adversary and the Indo-Pacific the "priority theatre" for US armed forces. But the administration failed to win the funding to implement the military's shift to the Indo-Pacific. It also damaged Washington's standing in the region by abandoning the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade deal and through its "America First" stance, which undermined relations with allies such as Japan.

The Biden administration's Indo-Pacific strategy aims to repair some of that damage. It stresses co-operation with US allies and partners in the region and, in stark contrast to Donald Trump's demands that allies "pay up" for US protection, stresses shared interests and values. It addresses Pacific Island states — vital to US military interests in the region but long neglected by Washington — as key partners, and makes climate change, an existential threat to many of them, a central issue for regional co-operation.

The strategy also promises an economic framework for the region, a response to long-running criticism that Washington's single-minded concentration on military security and geopolitics puts it at a disadvantage in its competition with China.

But critics say it falls short. Asian countries had hoped Washington would consider returning to the TPP, now called the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, as the regional trade grouping expands quickly. China, which is already part of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, another regional trade deal, has applied to join. But the Biden administration is pushing for higher labour and environmental standards in trade as well as supply chain resilience instead.

"What several countries in the region want is access to the US market without strings attached. The region has come together for two major trade agreements, and the US message is: neither is good enough for us," Townshend says. "The US's market share is no longer such that it could afford that — it now needs to compete for its economic influence in the region."

Moreover, the strategy does not offer any indication of how its lofty goals could be implemented any better than past promises of more US attention to Asia.

That is why doubts over Washington’s engagement in the Ukraine issue are weighing so heavily. Government officials in some Asian capitals believe that the crisis saddles the US with a dilemma. On the one hand, if Washington becomes too deeply involved it will be distracted from Asia and China, the country the Pentagon [calls](#) its “pacing challenge”. On the other, failure to help protect Ukraine from a Russian invasion will further undermine confidence in US ability to protect the global rules-based order.

“They can’t do it right,” says a Japanese diplomat. “Remember the Afghanistan pullout — it was meant at least partly to demonstrate that they are serious about prioritising the Indo-Pacific but it ended up being read as a demonstration of weakness and lack of commitment.”

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