

The Big Read **US-China relations**

How the US is deepening military alliances in China's backyard



The Biden administration is stepping up security initiatives to boost deterrence and better prepare for potential conflict over Taiwan

Demetri Sevastopulo in Tokyo and **Kathrin Hille** in Clark, Philippines YESTERDAY

In the three decades since the end of the cold war, the leafy streets around Mimosa Plus Golf Course in Clark, an area about 92km north of the Philippines' capital Manila, have been largely quiet, populated mainly by retirees.

But one day in April, about 100 US troops were sitting on a pavement and more spilling out of a hotel — a reminder of an era when Clark was the world's biggest air base outside US territory.

“They're back,” says onlooker Denmark Blances, a tourism student. “I've never seen so many US uniforms.” The troops were participating in Balikatan, or “shoulder to shoulder”, a large military exercise the US conducts annually with its oldest ally in Asia. This year it involved more than 17,600 members of the forces, the most since the US lost permanent access to Clark in 1991.

The stepped-up drills are just one element of an expansive, multi-pronged strategy that the Biden administration has introduced across the Indo-Pacific to counter what it sees as the growing military threat from China in the region.

When Joe Biden took office, there was some concern, particularly among allies such as Japan, that he might adopt a weaker approach on China than his predecessor Donald Trump, who took a much sharper position than previous US presidents.

Yet Biden has taken an unexpectedly tough stance in terms of security and other measures such as export controls designed to prevent China from obtaining advanced semiconductors.

In the diplomatic realm, he has sought to ramp up co-ordination with allies in Asia that were already becoming tougher on China, while persuading initially reluctant European allies to strike a tougher tone. That has been accompanied by numerous security initiatives designed to boost deterrence in Asia, and to help Washington and its allies to better prepare for conflict with China over Taiwan if deterrence fails.

The sweep of US power in the western Pacific

Places where the US has bases or access to host-nation bases and facilities





Ely Ratner, the Pentagon's top Asia official, says there has been “extraordinary alignment” between US allies on everything from Indo-Pacific strategy documents to drills and joint exercises they have conducted in the region. This is part of a wider effort to create what officials describe as a more “latticed” security architecture across the region to boost deterrence.

“This is manifesting itself in the degree to which partners are investing in their own capabilities, increasingly co-operating with each other and wanting to deepen alliances and partnerships with us,” says Ratner. “All these trends are occurring at the same time with everyone rowing in the same direction.”

The overriding challenge for Washington is to find ways to overcome the so-called tyranny of distance that puts it on the back foot. Not only does China have far more ships and aircraft within striking distance of Taiwan, the US also must contend with the large distances between its deployed forces across the Indo-Pacific, a massive region that spans more than 50 per cent of the planet.

In a recent success, the US convinced Manila to give its military access to four more bases in the Philippines, including three in the north of the main island of Luzon, a strategic location near Taiwan. It marked a big shift from the previous administration

of Rodrigo Duterte, which came close to cropping the alliance with the US as it aligned more closely with China.

This is only one strand of an overall American effort to reboot the Asia “pivot” that President Barack Obama launched in 2011. But in a sign of how much concern about China has risen over the past decade, “pivot 2.0” comes with more substance and greater European involvement, senior officials say.



American soldiers take part in joint military exercises with the Philippines in April. The US recently convinced Manila to give its military access to four more bases in the country © Jam Sta Rosa/AFP/Getty Images

“The pivot was pilloried, probably rightly in many respects. One of the biggest concerns was the idea that we were pivoting to Asia from Europe,” says a senior US official. “It is undeniable now that a huge part of our strategy . . . is to link these two theatres in both strategic and practical ways.”

While the US has encouraged Asian allies, such as Japan and South Korea, to increase their support for Ukraine, it has also urged European countries, including the UK, France and Germany, to become more visible in the Indo-Pacific by sailing navy ships through the South China Sea.

For all the security-related activity, however, it is not clear if the US is doing enough to prevent China from shifting the balance of power in the region in its direction. It

also does not have the sort of joint military plans for Asia that it has with NATO in Europe.

Some critics say that, under the Biden administration, the US has focused too much on its military and not enough on an economic strategy to counter the gravitational pull of the Chinese market.

Kori Schake, head of foreign policy and defence studies at AEI, a Washington-based think-tank, says: “What they’ve gotten terribly wrong is a strategy that over-militarises the China problem because it fails to deliver on an economic vision that helps the US and allies reduce their reliance on China.”



USS Milius and USNS Charles Drew in the Philippine Sea. The US has encouraged European countries to become more visible in the Indo-Pacific by sailing navy ships through the South China Sea © U.S. Navy/Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Greg JohnsonABACA/Reuters

Other observers also fear the Russian invasion of Ukraine could take Washington's attention and resources, such as weapons, away from Asia over time. Jennifer Lind, an Asia security expert at Dartmouth College, says the Biden administration “scores highly on tactics” but that its focus on the war raging in Europe has the potential to become an obstacle.

“While the Biden administration manages a superpower competition with China, it is wading deeper and deeper into the Russia-Ukraine war,” says Lind. “As that war drags on, the risks of trade-offs will grow.”

CHANGING, THE RISKS OF TRADE-TENSION WILL GROW.

Smoother transition

From the very start of his administration, Biden made some big moves to assert the influence of the US in the Indo-Pacific.


In early 2021, he resurrected the Quad, a security grouping formed in 2007 consisting of the US, Japan, Australia and India that had fallen dormant after Canberra and New Delhi grew concerned about provoking Beijing.

Later that year, the US signed the Aukus deal with the UK and Australia to enable Canberra to obtain a fleet of nuclear-powered submarines. To cover the two decades before the new submarines are built, the US will deploy four nuclear-powered submarines in Australia from 2027, and later sell at least three Virginia-class submarines to Canberra.

The US also agreed to deploy more fighter jets, bombers and other assets to Australia on a rotational basis to respond to the growing Chinese presence in the western Pacific.

Biden's next step was to strengthen Washington's relationship with Tokyo. His administration has increased co-operation over everything from military exercises and table-top war games to joint operational planning for any potential conflict.





Prime ministers Fumio Kishida of Japan, right, Anthony Albanese of Australia, left, Narendra Modi of India, and Joe Biden at the G7 last month. The countries make up the Quad security group © Jonathan Ernst/POOL/AFP/Getty Images

But the biggest milestone in the Indo-Pacific region has been the seismic shift in Japan's defence policy in response to China, which it has called its "greatest strategic challenge". In December 2022, Tokyo unveiled its landmark national security strategy, which pledged to significantly boost defence spending and acquire counterstrike weapons. In the short term, Tokyo plans to buy 400 American Tomahawk cruise missiles, giving it the ability to strike China.

More recently, in January, the two countries announced that the US Marine Corps would deploy mobile units with intelligence and surveillance capabilities and anti-ship weapons, known as the Marine Littoral Regiment, in Okinawa, the Japanese island where the US has long had a military presence. They also agreed to increase training and exercises on the Nansei chain of islands, a critical region for defending Taiwan.

"The most important development in the Indo-Pacific since the turn of the century, beyond China's trajectory, was Japan's new national security announcements and the alliance announcements in January," says Phil Davidson, the former head of US Indo-Pacific command. "Those were really powerful."

But the US is not only focused on its biggest allies. It has also been forced to step up co-operation with smaller Pacific Island nations after Beijing shocked Washington last year by [signing a security pact](#) with the Solomon Islands.

In response, the US last week signed a security pact with Papua New Guinea and extended so-called Compact of Free Association agreements with Palau and the Federated States of Micronesia — deals that will give the US military exclusive access to facilities for two decades.

"The Biden team has made remarkable progress in expanding access to facilities in east Asia over the past six months," says Zack Cooper, a former Pentagon official. "Deals with Japan, the Philippines, Australia, Papua New Guinea and the Freely Associated States are all critical to dispersing US forces and assets."

Kurt Campbell, the top White House Indo-Pacific official, says: "Our sustained engagement with the Indo-Pacific region has been a top priority for this administration as we reaffirm our commitments and expand opportunities of collaboration between the US and our partners."

‘Unity of effort’

While the US wants to tackle what it sees as its disadvantage of distance, it also plans to deploy military assets more widely across the region, creating a more mobile, dispersed force that is less vulnerable to Chinese missiles.

“We are [what is known as] a ‘stand-in force’ and the key to that is fighting within the weapons engagement zone,” says Colonel Timothy Brady, commander of an Okinawa-based unit operating within an area susceptible to such attacks.



Wendy Sherman, right, US deputy secretary of state, and Ely Ratner, the Pentagon's top Asia official. Ratner says Washington's strategy has boosted the independent co-operation of its allies © Amanda Andrade-Rhoades/Reuters

But with China having far more facilities to operate from, argues Cooper, this means the US “era of seamlessly projecting power in Asia in a contingency is over”.

This is forcing the Pentagon to seek out fresh approaches. In addition to the Marine Corps’ “stand-in force” concept, the US Air Force is adopting an “agile combat employment” model, which would allow it to rapidly deploy mobile units.

“These are intended to allow smaller units to maintain combat effectiveness, helping to minimise the juicy targets that China could hit while still retaining the US ability to operate in a contingency,” Cooper adds.

A senior US official says that as well as changing how its forces are positioned, the Pentagon also needs to do more in terms of procuring long-range missiles and unmanned systems. This would reduce the risk of having too many assets concentrated in places vulnerable to missile attacks.

Rory Medcalf, an Indo-Pacific expert at the Australian National University, says US efforts to be more agile would send an important message. “Demonstrating that the US is able . . . to deploy quickly in the Indo-Pacific, would be good,” says Medcalf. “It’s really those signals to reassure partners that China is not going to be able to take out a few [sophisticated] platforms in the early days of a conflict, which would effectively knock America out of the war.”

Ratner, of the Pentagon, argues that one of the “most novel” parts of Washington’s approach is the extent to which its allies are increasingly networking together. This is one element of a wider strategy to create “a more resilient, distributed, mobile and lethal presence in the Indo-Pacific region”, he says.

Japan, for instance, has signed Reciprocal Access Agreements with Australia and the UK, which will allow its military to exercise with British and Australian forces in their countries and vice versa. Tokyo and Manila are negotiating similar terms.



Steven Rudder, centre, former head of US marine forces in the Pacific, with fellow military officials and representatives. He says alliances in the region can work as a deterrent © David Mareuil/Anadolu Agency/Getty

Lieutenant General Steven Rudder, who retired last year as the head of US marine forces in the Pacific, says these alliances can have powerful effects. “Interoperability with Australia, Japan, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and India etc, creates this unity of effort, which is . . . a deterrence model of its own.”

Ratner says the Pentagon is also trying to integrate Japan into its initiatives with Australian forces aimed at boosting interoperability between all three militaries. In a historic first, Japan last year sent fighter jets to take part in Pitch Black, a multilateral air force exercise based out of the northern Australian city of Darwin. Germany and South Korea also participated for the first time.

According to the US official, Washington is hopeful about finalising some trilateral defence co-operation with Japan and South Korea when Lloyd Austin, the US defence secretary, attends the Shangri-La Dialogue security forum in Singapore this week.

He adds: “For all the gloom that tends to permeate discussions of international geopolitics right now, that’s just not the picture in the Indo-Pacific.”

Possibility of war

While the Biden team has made big strides towards boosting deterrence, the ultimate challenge is how well it is prepared for the possibility of war over Taiwan if those efforts fall short.

Obstacles range from ensuring Taipei can obtain the weapons it needs to defend itself to streamlining US bureaucracy to expedite their delivery. The war in Ukraine has underscored the need to preposition weapons in and around Taiwan because of the difficulty of supplying arms to an island once a conflict has begun.

Michael Green, a former top White House Asia official, says another challenge for the US is the need to expand its “access, basing and overflight” rights — a reference to agreements made with other countries to allow its military to operate with fewer restraints during wartime. “They’re making some progress, but don’t have all the agreements the Pentagon would like,” he says.

The Philippines is a prime example of a success that also remains a challenge. While President Ferdinand Marcos Jr approved US access to bases in his country, he said during a visit to the US this month that he did not want the Philippines to become a “stage post” for military action.



Aircraft take off from the USS Ronald Reagan's deck. There is concern among US allies in the Indo-Pacific region that a build-up of military assets could make their countries a target for Beijing © U.S. Navy/Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Gray Gibson/ABACA/Reuters

“There’s a lot more work that needs to be done on scenario development, and that will take years,” says the senior US official, referring to the two sides working out how they would handle various situations during a conflict.

Even with Japan, the strongest US ally in the region, Washington has to tread carefully. “It’s not even like in Iraq or Afghanistan, where we had a little more freedom of manoeuvre,” says one US general. “In Japan and the Philippines, we have to work with the governments and with the public opinion.”

Local concerns particularly come into play when the pre-positioning of weapons is involved because of anxiety that a build-up of military assets could make their country a more likely target for Beijing.

Arguably the biggest challenge for the US, however, is to get its allies to the point where they are conducting joint operational exercises based on actual joint war plans. This particularly applies to Japan and Australia, the nations most likely to fight alongside the US in a war in the region.

“What would be helpful in the region is deeper day-to-day operational integration between US and Japanese self-defence forces, between US and Australian forces,”

says one former senior US military officer, adding that integration with British, Canadian and French forces would also be welcome.

Integration is a two-way street. The US military must also “learn much more serious habits of true collaboration . . . based on joint decision-making and shared operational concepts,” says the senior US official.

Pentagon planners want to have joint war plans with allies in the Indo-Pacific just as they have had for decades in Europe with Nato.

The issue of joint planning is very sensitive among allies, however, as leaks could reinforce Beijing's narrative that the US and its partners are teaming up to contain China and spark retaliation.

“The Pentagon wants joint plans that it can execute. That is the next big thing in case we have to fight China,” the person says. “That is a big ask for our allies.”

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