

BIDEN'S CHINA POLICY¹

Vasco Rato

Former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo recently suggested that the ongoing Sino-American rivalry is considerably more dangerous than the competition that pitted the United States against the Soviet Union during the Cold War². The remarks seem to attest that American foreign policy elites no longer believe that engagement with the People's Republic of China (PRC) is sufficient to open China to pluralism, democratization and a “peaceful rise”. Pompeo's statement is additional evidence of the breakdown of the broad bipartisan foreign policy consensus dominant before Donald Trump's presidency. Indeed, Bill Clinton's enlargement strategy remained – albeit with nuances and variations – virtually unchanged during the Clinton, George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations³. The approach led Americans – and Europeans – to conclude that China could emerge as a stakeholder in the international liberal order and, rather more optimistically, move towards democratic politics. Yet, rather than hampering China's emergence, Western policy options effectively accelerated the country's rise to peer competitor status. The vertiginous collapse of the Soviet Union necessarily provoked a modification of America's Cold War grand strategy. Viewing the United States as the “indispensable nation”, the Clinton Administration shaped a new, broad consensus meant to enlarge the “community of free nations” and thus make the United States “safer, more prosperous and influential”⁴. That new bipartisan consensus postulated that globalization, understood mainly

ABSTRACT

Donald Trump upended America's long-standing, post-Cold war bipartisan China consensus. Initially focused on trade issues, particularly trade imbalances, Administration policy moved toward a more confrontational approach encompassing major security initiatives in the neighborhood. Focusing on the first year of Joe Biden's China policy, this article seeks to demonstrate the broad continuity between the Biden and Trump Administrations approach to Beijing.

Keywords: United States, China, Donald Trump, Joe Biden.

RESUMO

A POLÍTICA CHINESA DE BIDEN

Donald Trump produz uma volta-face na política chinesa dos Estados Unidos. Inicialmente centrada nas questões comerciais, particularmente nos elevadíssimos desequilíbrios do défice comercial externo, a Administração republicana evoluiu para uma posição mais confrontacional, passando por importantes iniciativas de segurança, incluindo a recuperação do Quad. Este artigo trata o primeiro



ano da política chinesa de Joe Biden que demonstra uma ampla continuidade com as linhas mestras da política de Trump relativamente a Pequim.

Palavras-chave: Estados Unidos, China, Donald Trump, Joe Biden.

in terms of market liberalization and the extension of free trade, generated social changes fostering democracy that would ultimately consolidate US national security. As a result, Russia and China, described by President Clinton as “our former adversaries”, would invariably be absorbed into the “international system as open, prosperous and stable nations”.⁵ Engagement with the PRC, including

through Western investment in the Chinese market, was seen as the vehicle for promoting the emergence of Chinese democracy. Armed with these convictions about the direction of political change, national interests and principles naturally aligned and no discernable contradiction existed between the promotion of democracy and the satisfaction of the vital US and Western national interests.⁶

By discarding this view, Donald Trump consummated a vertiginous turn in US policy toward China. Initially focused on issues of trade inequity, particularly the colossal deficits accruing from trade imbalances between the two countries, the Administration’s increasingly confrontational stance led to promotion of important security initiatives such as the resumption of the dormant Quad.⁷ By the time Trump departed the White House, relations had morphed into a tense, unceasing global rivalry. Since the President’s orientation mirrored new international realities produced by the growing assertiveness of Chinese might, his China policy mirrored structural changes in the international environment. The change did not, as Trump’s critics charge, reflect the mere whims of a mercurial chief executive; rather, the President broke with an antiquated post-Cold War “normality” beyond restoration. Indeed, the first year of the Biden Administration’s posture toward China – the subject of this article – pointed to a tremendous continuity with Trump’s much maligned policy.

TRUMP’S POLICY TURN

Once in the Oval Office, Donald Trump rapidly set out to undo the “China consensus”, denounce the benign expectations underlying US engagement policy and, ultimately, reverse the nation’s “decline” by adopting policies designed to “Making America Great Again”. These broad aims were articulated when, in June 2015, Trump formally announced his candidacy for the Republican Party’s presidential nomination. At that point, a host of foreign policy priorities were outlined: the cessation of ending undocumented immigration, the renegotiation or abandonment of existing free trade agreements, the reversion of the country’s de-industrialization, the recovery of American jobs and the war on terrorism. In effect, he pledged to wrestle US foreign policy from the traditional political-cultural elitism of an unresponsive, alienated *establishment* entrenched in the country’s universities, think tanks and federal agencies.⁸

Perhaps no so surprisingly, Trump refused to allocate blame to China for the industrial devastation he attributed to globalization. Maintaining that Beijing was simply pursuing

its vital interests, the candidate censured Obama for not revising – or simply abandoning – “unfair” international trade agreements of the 90s at the root of America’s decline. However, he did denounce Chinese manipulation of trade rules and the multiple obstacles confronting US companies seeking to enter the Chinese market: discriminatory practices and barriers, forced technology transfers, intellectual property theft and the absence of reforms in the Chinese state sector. Curiously, 70 years after the abolition of the ‘unequal treaties’ imposed on China during the ‘century of national humiliation’, an American President found himself protesting “unfair treaties” and demanding bilateral trade reciprocity. When the Chinese authorities failed to correspond to Administration demands, trade tensions morphed into a general, full-spectrum geostrategic rivalry. Arriving at the White House, the President abandoned ongoing talks on the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), thus fulfilling a campaign pledge made on June 6, 2016, when he characterized the proposal as “another disaster done and pushed by special interests who want to rape our country, just a continuing rape of our country. That’s what it is, too. It’s a harsh word: It’s a rape of our country.”⁹ As part of his general revision relations with Asia, the President-elect, mere days after defeating Hillary Clinton, accepted a phone call from Taiwan’s Tsai Ing-wen, thus affording her the status of a head of state rather than that of the leader of a “Chinese province.”¹⁰ Following the 1979 normalization of Sino-Americana relations, no US president had spoken directly to Taiwan’s chief official. Beijing could hardly ignore such an explicit diplomatic signal, not least because, during the campaign, Trump professed not to understand the need to maintain the “one China” policy if other matters, including trade, could not be negotiated with the communist government.¹¹ Crucially, because he also admitted the possibility of abandoning the *status quo* guiding Washington’s policy since Richard Nixon’s 1972 meeting with Mao Zedong, the Tsai Ing-wen phone call was a harbinger of things to come.¹² Trump’s assertiveness in relation to China largely mirrored the national *Zeitgeist*. An August 2019 Pew Research survey revealed that a full 60% of Americans no longer viewed China as benign; while an impressive 24% identified it as the most significant threat facing the United States. This outlook was mirrored in the White House’s December 2017 National Security Strategy of the United States.¹³ that “China and Russia challenge American power, influence, and interests, attempting to erode American security and prosperity”, the document defined the PRC as a ‘competitor’ and a ‘revisionist power.’¹⁴ China’s emergence on the world stage therefore required a still-absent strategic response encompassing, *inter alia*, the reconfiguration of alliances and the securitization of commercial and techno-scientific flows. Cognizant of the structural shift in the international system, the Biden Administration did not introduce significant discontinuities with Trump’s Chinese policy. In the immediate aftermath of the March 2021 Alaska summit, Secretary of State Antony Blinken succinctly summarized the Administration’s approach in the following terms: “the United States’ relationship with China will be competitive where it should be,”¹⁵

collaborative where it can be, adversarial where it must be”. A year after President Biden’s swearing-in, rivalry and confrontation continue to dominate Sino-American relations. Cooperation, where detectable, remains scarce. This is not to say that all is

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as before. Trump’s preference for bilateral relationships has given way to Biden’s general partiality for alliances and multilateralism. Less clear is whether Biden’s Chinese policy will become more or less confrontational over the remaining years of his mandate.

THE ROAD TO ANCHORAGE

When Joe Biden took the oath of office, it was hardly a forgone conclusion that he would decide to pursue the main tenets of his predecessor’s China policy.¹⁶ During the 2020 presidential campaign, the Democrat expressed reservations over Trump’s dire reading of the challenge posed by the PRC. For instance, in May 2019, he criticized the President’s trade war, arguing that the inherent strength of America’s political and economic systems prevented China from being “competition for us.”¹⁷ On the same day Biden entered the Oval Office, Antony Blinken and Janet Yellen – respectively nominated Secretary of State and of Treasury – indicated the President would pursue a multilateral path in close coordination with Washington’s Asian and European allies, seeming to confirm a less unilateralist approach to the PRC.¹⁸

Yet, regarding strategic goals, Biden signaled his unwillingness to depart from Trump’s general orientation during his first telephone conversation with Xi Jinping. On February 10, when the long-delayed call was finally made, the President expressed his “fundamental concerns about Beijing’s coercive and unfair economic practices, crackdown in Hong Kong, human rights abuses in Xinjiang, and increasingly assertive actions in the region, including toward Taiwan.”¹⁹ Rather unsurprisingly, his Chinese counterpart replied that “while the two sides may differ on some issues, it is crucial to show mutual respect, treat each other as equals, and properly manage and handle the differences in a constructive fashion,” adding – crucially – that “Taiwan, Hong Kong and Xinjiang are China’s internal affairs and concern China’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, and the that “the US side should respect China’s core interests and act prudently.”²⁰ The parameters of the bilateral relationship for the next few years were thus starkly outlined by both sides.

The first indications as to the broad outlines of Biden’s China policy emerged with the publication of the *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance*. Understood as an interim ‘roadmap’, the document highlighted three strategic priorities: the security of the American people, the expansion of opportunities and economic prosperity and the defense of the democratic values underpinning the American way of life. Like Trump, Biden identified China, Russia, North Korea and Iran as geostrategic adversaries. Evincing

a turn to realism, the Obama Administration's aim of "building deeper and more effective partnerships with other key centers of influence" such as China and Russia was noticeably absent from the text.²¹ In point of fact, the new "roadmap" noted that the PRC had become more "assertive" and added that Beijing and Moscow were pursuing strategies meant to "prevent us from defending our interests and allies around the world".²² Distinguishing Biden from his predecessor, the document proclaimed that "America is back" and assured that the new President would reaffirm US leadership through strengthened alliances and multilateralism.²³ Relegated to a secondary priority by Trump's National 2017 Security Strategy, the defense of democracy and human rights emerged as a fundamental pillar of Biden's China policy. Because the Sino-American rivalry was understood as a dispute between democracy and autocracy, it assumed a universal dimension.

Once the Administration defined its strategic guidelines, consultations with America's Asian allies began in preparation for the first high-level meeting with Chinese authorities, scheduled for March 18-19, 2021, in Anchorage, Alaska. On the eve of their departure for Asia, the Secretaries of State and Defense published a major policy article in *The Washington Post*, where they sought to convey to Indo-Pacific states that

"the United States is now making a big push to revitalize our ties with friends and partners — both in one-to-one relationships and in multilateral institutions — and to recommit to our shared goals, values and responsibilities."²⁴

Both Cabinet officials reiterated the conviction that alliances were "force multipliers" and, thus, it would be "a huge strategic error to neglect these relationships".²⁵ Stressing the need for a "fundamental debate" on "whether democracy or autocracy offers the best path forward", the article called for unity among democratic countries and, evoking Harry Truman's 1947 containment speech before Congress, stressed the Administration's commitment to the defense of pluralist values "wherever they are challenged".²⁶ Blinken and Austin concluded that since the 'Indo-Pacific is increasingly the center of global geopolitics', American interest lay in the establishment of a region "free and open, anchored by respect for human rights, democracy and the rule of law".²⁷ No less important, the authors note that some states "seek to challenge the international order" and that "China in particular is all too willing to use coercion to get its way."²⁸ Faced such a considerable threat to international order, China would be held accountable "when it abuses human rights in Xinjiang and Tibet, systematically erodes autonomy in Hong Kong, undercuts democracy in Taiwan or asserts maritime claims in the South China Sea that violate international law."²⁹

The publication of the article coincided with statements made before Congress by Indo-Pacific Commander Admiral Phil Davidson, warning that China may attempt to control Taiwan in six years as part of its effort to "supplant the United States and our leadership

role in the rules-based international order, which they've long said that they want to do that by 2050.”³⁰ Admiral Davidson's words were representative of military concerns and easily dovetailed with The Administration's view of China as a global challenge to the liberal international order created by the United States and its European and Asian allies in the wake of World War II. If President Trump rump had been ambivalent about the extent to to which that liberal order promoted vital US interests, the new Administration entertained no qualms on the matter.

A few days prior to the Anchorage meeting, the semi-official *Global Times* published an editorial rebuking Washington's use of Indo-Pacific allies as “strategic bargaining chips” in its dealings with China.³¹ Playing down Blinken and Austin visits to South Korea and Japan, the editorial claimed that “what Washington sees as a real threat is China's

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growing economic development,” adding that Americans “indulged into the belief that the problems of the US' problems were primarily China's fault, and that containment and decoupling from China would restore US' absolute dominance in the world.”³² Insisting that the real problems

confronting the United States stemmed from the “decline in its competitiveness in the era of globalization”, the article claimed Washington was “too addicted to military and financial hegemony” while the “speed of innovation is declining, and its labor force as a whole is becoming lazy”.³³ America's problems were domestic in nature. Scapegoating China may have been convenient, but if Washington failed to alter its strategic posture relative to Beijing, it would “inevitably face problems in the long run”.³⁴ On March 17, 2021, the day before talks in Anchorage got underway, Lloyd Austin, asked about the purpose of the visit to Japan and South Korea, replied that consultations were a part of a broader effort to “make sure we have the capabilities and the operational plans and concepts to offer credible deterrence to China or anybody else who would want to take on the U.S.”³⁵ At the same time, Blinken criticized Beijing's aggression and urged Seoul and Tokyo to work with Washington to prevent a “dangerous erosion of democracy” in the region.³⁶ Put differently, the expansion of Chinese might in the region raised the danger of bandwagoning; that is, of allies succumbing to the temptation of allying with the emerging power so as to to maximize gains.³⁷ In light of this possibility, Blinken and Austin were unequivocal: Washington understood its network of alliances in the Indo-Pacific as an asset in the competition with Beijing and intended to strengthen them so as to consolidate a robust, close-knit coalition capable of countering China.

On the same day that Blinken and Austin clarified Administration intentions, Washington imposed punitive sanctions on 24 Chinese citizens linked directly to the suppression of Hong Kong's democracy movement.³⁸ Foreign financial institutions

engaging in transactions with the individuals targeted would also become subject to sanctions. That same day, invoking national security concerns, the telecommunications regulator – the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) – opened an investigation to determine whether the commercial licenses attributed to China Unicom Americas, Pacific Networks and ComNet should be revoked. Earlier, in December 2020, the FCC had launched a similar inquiry aimed at withdrawing the 2007 authorization allowing China Telecom (Americas) – China’s largest state-owned telecommunications company – to operate in the U.S. market. Faced with these significant setbacks, China’s Ambassador in Washington, Cui Tiankai, warned that “unilateral pressure and sanctions only lead to a dead end” and, thus, called for “constructive bilateral communication” in Anchorage.³⁹

Yet, the profound differences separating Washington and Beijing during the first session of the Alaska summit elicited mutual recrimination rather than constructive communication. The parties brought to the venue expectations that were largely irreconcilable. Before talks began, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan admitted the meeting would enable the US to address Beijing from “a position of strength”, but insisted that no regular dialogue would be resumed.⁴⁰ Indeed, Blinken and Sullivan understood the summit as a one-off encounter providing them with an opportunity to articulate American concerns regarding the rollback of democracy in Hong Kong, human rights abuses in Xinjiang, tensions in the Taiwan Strait, Chinese economic coercion against Australia and incursions into waters disputed with Japan. For the American side, these issues required full clarification if improvements in the bilateral relationship were to be considered.

The gap in expectations as to the nature of the summit was stressed by Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian when he claimed that “at the invitation of the United States” China “will have a high-level strategic dialogue with the US side in the coming days” to set the way to resume engagement⁴¹. Zhao further suggested that his country’s understanding of “normal ties” meant that “both sides must respect each other and treat each other as equals, enhance mutual understanding through dialogue, manage and dissolve differences, and bring China-United States relations back to the right track.”⁴² Represented in Anchorage by Yang Jiechi and Wang Yi, Beijing saw the meeting as an opportunity for the parties to redefine their bilateral relationship and, consequently, articulate the outlines of a new international order incorporating PRC core values and interests. Washington retorted that Beijing’s call for a broad redefinition of bilateral relations was contingent upon a shift in Chinese behavior that, in Blinken’s view, “threatens the rules-based order that maintains global stability.”⁴³ Since the world would be ‘much more violent and unstable’ in the absence of these rules, the concerns raised by the United States were not “merely internal”; that is, they were not matters pertaining to Chinese sovereignty alone.⁴⁴

FROM ANCHORAGE TO KABUL

Whereas – at least formally – the Chinese side hoped to restore “normality” to the bilateral relationship, it became increasingly evident that Chinese and American views on the nature of international order were not coincidental. During the March 18 opening session of the Anchorage Summit, Blinken made it abundantly clear that the Biden Administration regarded China as its main geopolitical rival and expressed his “deep concerns with actions by China, including in Xinjiang, Hong Kong, Taiwan, cyber-attacks on the United States, economic coercion against our allies.”⁴⁵ In response to these observations, Yang Jiechi accused the United States of being “condescending” and of using its military and financial might to obstruct trade flows and incite anti-China sentiment.⁴⁶ In short, he maintained that unlike the United States “we do not believe in invading by the use of force, or to topple other regimes through various means, or to massacre the people of other countries, because all of those would only cause turmoil and instability in this world.”⁴⁷ As direct as it was uncompromising, the statement was tantamount to a generic condemnation of post-Cold War, unipolar U.S. foreign policy. Rather unexpectedly, the Chinese delegation then hardened their discourse by pointing out that recent Black Lives Matter demonstrations and America’s legacy of “institutional racism” – openly acknowledged by the Biden Administration – demonstrated Washington’s naked hypocrisy in the realm of human rights.⁴⁸ Fundamental disagreements were acknowledged with regard to Hong Kong, Xinjiang, Tibet and Taiwan, but the parties pledged themselves to identify areas in which limited cooperation could be achieved, including climate change and a host of geopolitical challenges posed by Iran, North Korea, Myanmar and Afghanistan.⁴⁹

Sino-American tensions were accentuated following the calamitous extraction of US forces from Afghanistan. Conducted in the absence of substantial consultations with European and Asian allies, the troop evacuation could not but generate mistrust among the America’s allies, which the Chinese immediately sought to exploit. In the course of the withdrawal, the semi-official *Global Times* warned the Taiwanese of the dangers inherent in their dependence on Washington. Suggesting that Tsai Ing-wen and the “separatists” accompanying her “must have been nervous and have an ominous pre-sentiment” and “should have known better in secret that the US is not reliable”, the article concluded that events in Afghanistan should lead Taipei to “realize that once a war breaks out in the Straits, the island’s defense will collapse in hours and the US military won’t come to help.”⁵⁰ With China sensing that the credibility of US security guarantees had been shaken, Blinken, summoned before Congress to clarify the impact of the Afghan withdrawal, reiterated America’s commitment to the terms of the Taiwan Relations Act of 1979.⁵¹

Shortly after, on 15 September 2021, Joe Biden relaunched the “Asia pivot” by way of a new Indo-Pacific security pact – Aukus – encompassing the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia. In a virtual ceremony gathering the US President and Prime

Ministers Boris Johnson and Scott Morrison, Biden described Aukus as an investment “on our greatest source of strength – our alliances”, in need of updating to “better meet the threats of today and tomorrow” and to “connect in new ways” the United States and its Pacific allies.⁵² Addressing the House of Commons, Boris Johnson acknowledged that Aukus was understood by his government as a “new pillar of our strategy demonstrating Britain’s generational commitment to the security of the Indo-Pacific”.⁵³ Scott Morrison, for his part, announced his willingness to discuss the initiative with Xi Jinping, although adherence to Aukus meant Canberra sided with the US against China in the Indo-Pacific and thereby was abandoning the hedge strategy that convinced Kevin Rudd to withdraw Australia from the Quad in 2008.⁵⁴

Meeting at the 2017 ASEAN Summit, Malcolm Turnbull, Shinzo Abe, Narendra Modi and Donald Trump agreed to resume the dormant quadrilateral dialogue. Xi Jinping’s assertiveness, rivalries in the South China Sea and Beijing’s use of the Belt and Road Initiative to consolidate positions in neighboring countries drove the revival of the Quad, increasingly seen as an instrument for safeguarding common political values and preserving regional order. However, the main reason for Quad’s reactivation was the change in orientation defined by Trump’s National Security Strategy; that is to say, the call for “increased quadrilateral cooperation with Japan, Australia and India.”⁵⁵ The decision to reengage with the broad Indo-Pacific came after Trump abandoned the Trans-Pacific Partnership, a decision that raised substantial doubts as to Washington’s commitment to the regional order.⁵⁶ Overcoming numerous ambiguities, advances and setbacks, enhanced quadrilateral cooperation denoted the profound changes in America’s commitment to the Indo-Pacific.

THE DECISION TO REENGAGE WITH THE BROAD
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The three Aukus leaders did not specify the nature of the “threats” justifying the new pact. Perhaps it was unnecessary to do so because it was clear that the Aukus constituted a response to PRC assertiveness and evolving military capabilities. According to the Aukus agreement, by 2040 Canberra was to be in possession of a fleet of nuclear submarines capable of patrolling the region, including vast stretches of the South China Sea falling within the “nine-dash line” unilaterally demarcated by Beijing.⁵⁷ The three allies also pledged to enhance the exchange of intelligence and share innovation in critical areas such as artificial intelligence, cybernetics and quantum computing. Such a commitment reflected the awareness that rivalry with China required adequate responses to the challenges posed by technical-scientific competition and the Belt and Road Initiative.

China’s official reaction to Aukus was as swift as it was resolute. Speaking for the Foreign Ministry, Zhao Lijian declared that supplying Australia with nuclear technology was “extremely irresponsible”, not least because of the eventual implosion of the bilateral

relationship, an outcome the Chinese attributed to the Australian side.⁵⁸ Zhao also maintained that Aukus was a destabilizing development to the extent that it “seriously undermines regional peace and stability, intensifies the arms race and undermines international non-proliferation efforts.”⁵⁹ The following day, China’s Ministry of Commerce launched a diplomatic counter-offensive by announcing it would seek membership in the 11-nation Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for the Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), the successor to the TTP previously abandoned by President Trump.⁶⁰ Having joined the Comprehensive Regional Economic Partnership (RCEP), Beijing in this fashion signaled its readiness to pull US allies into its geostrategic orbit and thus foster coalitions contesting Washington’s regional leadership.⁶¹

These moves were in conformity with China’s determination to be recognized as a great power, an aim evinced by the 2019 *Defense White Paper (China’s National Defense in a New Age)*. Describing the People’s Liberation Army as “a staunch force for world peace, stability and the building of a community with a shared future for mankind”, the document emphasized the country’s benign intentions and, thus, reassured neighboring states fearful of the growth of Chinese military might.⁶² In 2014, responding to changing regional realities driven by an increasingly robust Chinese military, the Trump Administration strategy for the Indo-Pacific area defined the PRC as a “revisionist” power that did not uphold the core principles underpinning the regional order.⁶³ Accepting this framework, the Biden White House understood the Quad as a component of a broader strategy congregating the region’s democratic states under American leadership. A different challenge, of course, was countering China’s strategic assertiveness stemming from its colossal economic power in the region.

TAIWAN: THE DANGER

Because the risk of a military clash with the PRC in Taiwan and the South China Sea cannot be dismissed, the Indo-Pacific is now the most dangerous region on the planet. Describing Taiwan as a “renegade province”, the 2019 *Defense White Paper* recalled that “we make no promise to renounce the use of force, and reserve the option of taking all necessary measures” to prevent the territory’s independence.⁶⁴ This military component of Xi Jinping’s broader “Chinese Dream” was highlighted by the document’s call for the Taipei government to respect the 1992 Consensus and the “one-China” principle it enshrines.⁶⁵ Taiwan is accused of blatantly pushing for gradual independence – for a *de jure* independence –, of intensifying “hostility and confrontation” and of “borrowing the strength of foreign influence”, an indirect albeit unequivocal reference to American support for Formosa. As a result, the text concludes that Taiwanese “separatist forces remain the gravest immediate threat to peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait and the greatest barrier hindering the peaceful reunification of the country.”⁶⁶ As for a lasting resolution to a problem dating to Chiang Kai-shek’s 1949 defeat, the *White Paper* held that “the complete reunification of the country is in the fundamental interests

of the Chinese nation and is essential for achieving national rejuvenation”; in other words, reunification is understood as a precondition for the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) transformation of the country into the world’s foremost power.

As a matter of fact, President Xi’s “national rejuvenation” project will remain incomplete unless Beijing succeeds in achieving the country’s full “reunification” by 2049, the centenary of Mao Zedong’s proclamation of the People’s Republic. To ensure this goal, and with a view to strengthening the legitimacy of the communist regime through nationalist mobilization, Xi intensified pressure on Taipei by deploying missiles capable of targeting the island, air raids and intimidatory naval exercises. On the broader international stage, Chinese diplomatic and economic influence has been relentlessly employed to isolate Taipei. As time passes and the Taiwanese develop a distinct identity, independentist sentiment will deepen and peaceful reunification will become an increasingly problematic outcome.

XI INTENSIFIED PRESSURE ON TAIPEI BY DEPLOYING MISSILES CAPABLE OF TARGETING THE ISLAND, AIR RAIDS AND INTIMIDATORY NAVAL EXERCISES.

Concomitantly, Formosa’s phenomenal economic and political success refutes the CCP’s claim positing the impossibility democracy and non-statist capitalism taking root on Chinese soil; that is, democratic Taiwan effectively confirms the existence of an alternative development model from that of the CCP. Year after year, it becomes increasingly arduous to claim that Taiwanese democracy lacks legitimacy, particularly after Beijing stifled the freedoms enshrined by Hong Kong’s special status agreement on the transfer of sovereignty. Predictably, since the Hong Kong model would be extended to Formosa following reunification, Xi’s repression of that territory augments Taiwanese vulnerabilities and the political chasm separating the two sides of the Strait. While Beijing continues to frame the Taiwan issue in terms of separatism, Taipei’s skepticism as to the viability of the “one country, two systems” model makes formal independence an increasingly attractive option.⁶⁷

Contrary to Beijing’s expectations, the deepening of economic interdependence between Taiwan and the PRC of recent decades has failed to bring the parties closer together. Taiwan emerged as an important link in international value chains and thus its forced integration into the People’s Republic cannot be achieved unless Beijing is prepared to undergo severe trade disruption and diplomatic isolation. Faced with such limited options, the communist authorities cannot readily step back from the belligerent rhetoric and military pressure of recent years. Unable to ensure unification except perhaps through the use of force, Xi may yield to temptation and invade should the United States signal that it will refrain from assisting Taiwan. Avoiding war therefore requires a robust American strategic posture in the region, particularly in the South China Sea and the East China Sea, where Chinese assertiveness, if not firmly countered, may lead Beijing to conclude that a military attack will not entail high costs.

Predictably, Beijing sought to to undermine US credibility in the Indo-Pacific by exploiting the difficulties faced by the Biden Administration in Afghanistan. Chinese intimidation of Taiwan was in evidence in the first days of October 2021, as the PRC celebrated the anniversary of its founding. On October 1, Beijing ordered the first of a series of sorties within Taiwan’s air defense identification zone (ADIZ). In response, the US State Department issued a statement conveying that the United States were “very concerned” about Beijing’s “provocative” maneuvers, seen as a “destabilizing action that risks miscalculations and undermines regional peace and stability.”⁶⁸ Calling for the cessation of “military, diplomatic and economic pressure and coercion” against the island, the statement added that “we will maintain our commitments” and “continue to assist Taiwan in maintaining a sufficient self-defense capability.”⁶⁹ Although no bilateral defense treaty has been celebrated with Taipei, Washington reiterates that the commitments enshrined in the Taiwan Relations Act remain “rock-solid.” In fact, as early as March 2021, Antony Blinken expressed concern over PRC assertiveness toward Formosa, warning that it would be a “serious mistake” for any power to seek an alteration to the *status quo* in the Taiwan Strait through the use of force.⁷⁰

The incisiveness of the State Department caused tremendous consternation in Beijing. The communist authorities respond by way of yet another editorial in the *Global Times* arguing that the expression “rock-solid” can “deceive and appease radical forces in the island of Taiwan, but can never deter” Beijing, which “will resolutely continue strengthening its military preparation to gain decisive and overwhelming leverage to finally resolve the Taiwan question.”⁷¹ Reasserting Chinese resolve, the editorial counseled the Taiwanese “not to believe in the ‘rock-solid’ promise of the United States, because Washington will never fight to the death with China for the island’s secession.”⁷² Seen from the desk of *Global Times*, the United States merely “aims to create the greatest obstruction to China’s rise by playing the “Taiwan card”, but this card is not the life-or-death one that the United States will defend regardless of costs and lives.”⁷³ Once again, in marked contrast with Beijing’s iron will to reunify the country, suspicion was cast relative to the reliability of American security guarantees. Given the atmosphere of uncertainty in the aftermath of Biden’s Afghan withdrawal, it became necessary to signal in no uncertain terms that a military onslaught against Formosa could trigger a catastrophic regional war. Following the Afghan *débaclé*, US credibility and, above all, its security guarantees made no allowance for hesitation and ambiguity in the Taiwan Strait. At the same time, the harshness of the US position indicated that President Biden’s attempts to appease Beijing – during a phone call with Xi he reaffirmed the “one-China” policy and in a September 2021 United Nations General Assembly speech rejected the prospect of a new Cold War – produced no practical effects. One day after the publication of the State Department statement, diplomatic failure was evinced as an even greater number of fighters and bombers, some nuclear-capable, again penetrated Taiwan’s ADIZ.

The long-standing *modus vivendi* in the Strait therefore remains unaltered since the parties cannot envision an alternative capable of safeguarding each nation's prestige and credibility. Xi will order an invasion if Taiwanese officials declare independence, even if such a decision means entering into war with the United States. This is the red line established by Beijing that cannot be violated under any circumstance. Since Xi may be tempted to invade if the United States demonstrated reluctance to defend the island, avoiding war then obliges the US to maintain a credible strategic posture, enhanced by regional allies prepared to counteract Chinese assertiveness and intimidation. American alliances – the Quad, the Aukus, as well as bilateral treaties with Australia, Japan and South Korea – are meant to convince Beijing that a military onslaught against Taiwan will be countered with a robust response. However, under penalty of compromising the prestige and credibility of the communist regime, China cannot alleviate pressure exercised in the Strait. Since miscalculation may inadvertently lead to war, regional dynamics are fraught with colossal danger.

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TO MAINTAIN A CREDIBLE STRATEGIC POSTURE,
ENHANCED BY REGIONAL ALLIES
PREPARED TO COUNTERACT CHINESE
ASSERTIVENESS AND INTIMIDATION.

CONCLUSION

The Alaska Summit demonstrated that Sino-American relations have failed to return to the “normality” of post-Cold War engagement. To a large extent, China policy guidelines determined by the Trump Administration persist and the shift of American focus to Asia will augment the transfer of military resources from the Middle East to the Indo-Pacific. As part of this effort, the Biden Administration has deepened high-level contacts with the Formosa and supplied it with weapons in conformity with the Taiwan Relations Act. In the economic sphere, tariffs imposed by the Trump Administration, criticized by candidate Biden during the presidential race, have not been eliminated.⁷⁴ Recently, Katherine Tai, the United States Trade Representative, signaled her willingness to negotiate a new understanding with Beijing, but insisted that “it is increasingly clear that China’s plans do not include meaningful reforms to address the concerns that have been shared by the United States and many other countries.”⁷⁵

Cooperation between China and the United States has been largely limited to climate change, with Xi Jinping attending Biden’s virtual April 2021 Summit on Climate. The essential question remains unanswerable: for how long can the two countries pursue a simultaneously confrontational and competitive relationship? As Biden emphasizes rebuilding partnerships with allies to contain China, those same allies – particularly European ones – welcome the “return” to multilateralism but eschew confrontation and the “logic” of a new Cold War. For the time being, Washington and its allies have not found a coherent strategy capable of reconciling cooperation pertaining to global public goods with containment in the defense and security spheres. In view of this

difficulty, the United States has sought to define new structures, such as the Quad and Aukus, to incorporate allies willing to pursue a containment strategy. Allies rejecting such a path will find themselves increasingly marginalized by a great power ever more focused on the Indo-Pacific and the challenges to the liberal order posed by the People's Republic of China. 

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Vasco Rato Professor of International Relations at Lusófona University (Lisbon). Researcher at the Portuguese Institute of International Relations – Nova University of Lisbon. He was President of

Luso-American Development Foundation between 2014 and 2020.

> Universidade Lusófona, Campo Grande, 376, 1749-024 Lisbon, Portugal | p5283@ulusofona.pt

ENDNOTES

¹ A Portuguese version of this paper was first published in *Relações Internacionais*, No. 71, September 2021.

² Cf. "POMPEO: Chinese threat may be worse than a Cold War 2.0". In *Politico*. August 8, 2020. Available in: <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/08/12/pompeo-chinese-threat-may-be-worse-than-cold-war-communism-394350>. Some time earlier, still in the office of Secretary of State, Pompeo, debuting the meagre results of the engagement, he assured that "we have done much to accommodate the rise of China in the hope that communist China will become freer, more market-oriented and ultimately more democratic. And we did it for a long time." Cf. "2019 HERMAN Kahn Award Remarks: US secretary of State Mike Pompeo on the China challenge". The Hudson Institute. October 30, 2019. Available in: https://s3.amazonaws.com/media.hudson.org/Transcript_Secretary%20Mike%20Pompeo%20Hudson%20Award%20Remarks.pdf.

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<https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=444939>. For a discussion of the Clinton Doctrine, see BRINKLEY, Douglas – "Democratic enlargement: the Clinton Doctrine". In *Foreign Policy*, No. 106, spring 1997, pp. 110-127, and DUMBRELL, J. – "Was there a Clinton Doctrine? President Clinton's foreign policy reconsidered." In *Diplomacy & Statecraft*. Vol. 13, No. 22, 2002, pp. 43-56.

⁵ In the same speech, proposing a *continued engagement*, Clinton added that "what is the best thing to do to maximize the chance of China going the right way and that because of that, the world will become freer, more peaceful and more prosperous in the 21st CENTURY? I don't think we can bring about change for China if we isolate China from the forces of change." Cf. "REMARKS by the President on foreign policy. Grand Hyatt Hotel, San Francisco, CA». The White House. February 26, 1999. Available in: <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/clintfps.htm>.

⁶ Expressing this view, Bill Clinton in 1997 stated that China's 'isolation is impractical, counterproductive and potentially dangerous. Military, political and economic measures to do so would find little support among our allies in the world and, more importantly, even among the Chinese themselves who work for greater freedom. Isolation would encourage The Chinese to become hostile and adopt policies in conflict with our own interests and values. It will make it difficult, not to facilitate, cooperation in the context of the proliferation of weapons. This would hinder, would not help, our efforts to promote stability in Asia. It would exacerbate, not improve, the situation of dissidents. That

would close, not open, one of the most important markets in the world. This would make China less, and no longer, likely to follow the rules of international conduct and be part of an emerging international consensus." Cf. "REMARKS by the President in Address on China and the national interest". The White House. Voice of America. Washington, DC. October 24, 1997. Available in: https://1997-2001.state.gov/regions/eap/971024_clinton_china.html. On the issue of interdemocratic peace, see RATO, Vasco – "But are they even more peaceful?". In *International Politics*. No. 18, autumn-winter 1998, pp. 93-114.

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⁸ Cf. THE WASHINGTON POST STAFF – «Donald Trump announces a presidential bid». In *The Washington Post*. 16 June 2015. Available in: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2015/06/16/full-text-donald-trump-announces-a-presidential-bid/>.

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