

JGSS

Journal of Global Strategic Studies

Vol. 01 No. 01 June 2021

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ASSESSING UNITED STATES GRAND STRATEGY: ESTIMATING THE PATTERN OF UNITED STATES FOREIGN POLICY ON SOUTHEAST ASIA UNDER THE BIDEN PRESIDENCY

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Abstract

Assessing United States (U.S.) past grand strategy is a useful guide to gauge foreign policy intentions enabling us to gain vital insights to discern the broad pattern of U.S. foreign policy under various administrations. Such an approach can be of benefit to the academic and policy community giving a sense of the foreign policy priorities of the Biden administration particularly with respect to the security of Southeast Asia. With this aim in mind, our article employs a variation of the analytical framework employed in the field of foreign policy evaluation to examine the possible options for U.S. Grand Strategy. At the risk of oversimplification, it selects and assesses four samples of U.S. Grand Strategy alternatives: isolationism, offshore balancing, selective engagement, and deep engagement. Next we focus on recent events to assess which pattern of Grand Strategy best describes the Biden administration's foreign policy stance. Our aim is that these insights will help regional actors to anticipate and respond accordingly to the Biden administration's foreign policy stance.

Introduction

The U.S. has faced significant challenges in recent years yet it still remains the preeminent country in the world. No other power comes close to matching its dominance in economic, military, diplomatic, financial, technological and cultural realms. Without a doubt, the options adopted by President Biden as he charts a new foreign course for his country will resonate with the rest of the world especially the Asian region.

While putting its domestic house in order by trying to reign in partisan divides nurtured by his predecessor Donald Trump and his poor handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, President Biden is addressing his country's fight against

the pandemic and thereby keeping its economic recovery on course. As a safeguard, a USD1.9 trillion stimulus is now in place to sustain the recovery.

More importantly, and for the purposes of this article, the U.S. has re-engaged international affairs after four years of his predecessor's America First strategy. The U.S. is back in the World Health Organisation (WHO), re-entered the Paris climate accords and aims to cooperate in the strengthening of the World Trade Organisation. Critically, the Biden Administration wants to ratchet up the pressure on its rivals China and Russia. There is a greater emphasis on improved ties with Asia and Europe with talk of a reinvigorated western alliance and a desire to give higher priority to Asian policy. We do not expect that the foreign policy road ahead to be smooth sailing. This is really the honeymoon phase for the Biden administration. In the foreign policy arena, some element of coordination between China and Russia will keep the U.S. off balance. Tests of the administration's resolve will almost certainly come from Iran and North Korea as these countries destabilise the strategic equation in their respective regions. With that context as the backdrop, how will Biden administration's grand strategy evolve and what will be the implications for Southeast Asia? Answering this question will be the objective of this article.

Understanding Grand Strategy

Grand strategy is one of those timeless concepts regularly examined within the International Relations (IR) literature dating back from the pre-Cold War era.¹ As an approach used to achieve long-term objectives, grand strategy represents the

¹ The history of the concept is perhaps at best murky. The concept appeared to gain prominence within the history and political science literature since the Second World War. See Edward Mead Earle, "Introduction," in *Makers of Modern Strategy*, ed. Edward Mead Earle (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1943); Bernard Brodie, "Strategy as a Science," *World Politics* 1, no. 4 (1949). For a more recent contribution, see John Lewis Gaddis, *On Grand Strategy* (New York: Penguin, 2018); Richard K. Betts, "The Grandiosity of Grand Strategy," *The Washington Quarterly* 42, no. 4 (2019); David Gethin Morgan-Owen, "History and the Perils of Grand Strategy," *The Journal of Modern History* 92, no. 2 (2020); Thierry Balzacq and Ronald R. Krebs, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Grand Strategy* (Oxford University Press, 2021).

highest level of planning on how any sitting government intends to secure its nation using various foreign policy tools in its arsenal. In addition, the policy and academic discussions on grand strategy predominantly revolve around the experience of great power, notably the U.S.² Moreover, assessing the grand strategy produces important insights that are useful to learn and to estimate the pattern of a particular country's goals, means, and commitments that shape its overall foreign policy.

Momentum to continue the discussion on U.S. grand strategy has arguably been reignited with the inauguration of Joseph Biden as the U.S. 46th President. In the run-up to the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election, Joe Biden as the Democratic Party's nominee for the presidency outlined his campaign promises that relate to America's foreign policy and its role in international politics.³ However, the newly elected President Biden now faces a more tenuous situation – both at home and abroad – compared to when President Donald Trump came into office four years ago. Around the globe, perceptions are strong that the U.S. is declining as a global influence with imminent challenges from both competitors and adversaries, and a society at home that is deeply polarised.

Within weeks into his administration, President Biden enacted an Interim National Security Strategic Guidance as the major policy guideline to address pressing challenges.⁴ Whether the Interim National Security document becomes

² To quote a few, prominent sample includes George Keenan's famous long telegram to Hal Brand's assessment on Trump's grand strategy. See George F. Keenan, "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," *Foreign Affairs* 25, no. 4 (1947); Hal Brands, *American Grand Strategy in the Age of Trump* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 2018).

³ See Joseph R. Biden Jr., "Why America Must Lead Again: Rescuing U.S. Foreign Policy After Trump," *Foreign Affairs* 99 (2020), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-01-23/why-america-must-lead-again>.

⁴ See Joseph R. Biden Jr., Interim National Security Strategic Guidance, (Washington, D.C.: The White House, 2021). Commentaries discussing Biden's INSS Guidance, see Richard Fontaine et al., "CNAS Responds: Assessing Biden's Interim National Security Strategy," news release, 5 March, 2021, <https://www.cnas.org/press/press-note/cnas-responds-assessing-bidens-interim-national-security-strategy>; Abhijnan Rej, "Biden's New Strategic Guidance: Squaring the Circle?," *The Diplomat* (5 March 2021). <https://thediplomat.com/2021/03/bidens-new-strategic-guidance-squaring-the-circle/>; Daniel W. Drezner, "Let's grade the Biden administration's interim strategic guidance," *The Washington Post* (9 March

another metaphorical “Christmas Tree” of U.S. foreign policy, or a meaningful guideline depends on how President Biden engages the world over the course of the second half of 2021. At the very least, the guideline will serve to consolidate the Biden administration’s authority over foreign policy, reorient the domestic support, and assure the reversal of Trump’s unsettling legacy.⁵ More importantly, the guideline translates President Biden’s campaign promises into a coherent plan to reaffirm U.S. commitments to global initiatives and reclaim America’s role as a “responsible” global leader.

Against this backdrop, this article asks the following questions: Based on the pattern of U.S. grand strategy alternatives, how will the Biden administration’s foreign policy engage Southeast Asia? To answer this question, this article proceeds with the aim of addressing two tasks. It first analyses a possible set of U.S. grand strategy alternatives using an analytical framework outlined in the subsequent section. Second, it provides a preliminary assessment on whether President Biden’s campaign vision and his actual foreign policy within the first few months fit into any discernible patterns as postulated in these grand strategy alternatives. The article though recognises two limitations. First, the assessment of U.S. grand strategy alternatives runs the risk of oversimplification.⁶ Second, the article acknowledges limitations in our analysis as this can only be a preliminary assessment on the ground that the Biden administration has only been in office since January 2021.

2021). <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2021/03/08/lets-grade-biden-administrations-interim-strategic-guidance/>.

⁵ Some of President Trump’s unsettling legacies – as some analysts have pointed out – include the present U.S. polarised society and challenging civil-military relations. See Matt Spetalnick et al., "Analysis: Trump's legacy: A more divided America, a more unsettled world," *Reuters* (2021), <https://www.reuters.com/article/usa-trump-legacy-analysis-int-idUSKBN29P0EX>. Jim Golby and Peter A. Feaver, "Biden Inherits a Challenging Civil-Military Legacy," *War on the Rocks* (2021), <https://warontherocks.com/2021/01/biden-inherits-a-challenging-civil-military-legacy/>.

⁶ The risk of oversimplification is within reasonable limit, considering that a grand strategy might represent the actual day-to-day strategic interaction. For another article acknowledging such risk see Stephen M. Walt, "The Case for Finite Containment: Analyzing U.S. Grand Strategy," *International Security* 14, no. 1 (1989): 6.

This article proceeds in the following manner. First, it starts by outlining the analytical framework by assessing different grand strategy alternatives. Following such a framework, the article then examines four samples of U.S. Grand Strategy alternatives: (neo)isolationism, offshore balancing, selective engagement, and deep engagement. Then, it puts forward a preliminary assessment of the Biden administration's foreign policy as observed from its first five months in office. The article concludes with reflection points targeted for both U.S. foreign policy observers and Southeast Asian policymakers.

Analytical Framework: Key Variables in Assessing Grand Strategy Alternatives.

Assessing grand strategy has become a regular exercise within the fields of Political Science, IR, and even History – particularly among U.S academia – which resulted in the need for us to delve into various existing analytical frameworks.⁷ This article contends that grand strategy can also be framed as a form of foreign policy output – albeit on a larger scale – and therefore can be assessed as a framework for policy evaluation.⁸ Despite the differences, this article finds common criteria shared by the perspectives of Walt and Mearsheimer and those of Baldwin. These criteria include: (1) limited or expanded definition of *national objectives* and *vital interest*; (2) the prescription that limits or allows the *means* and *cost* of conducting foreign policy to achieve such vital interest; and lastly (3) the *stake* or *willingness* in conducting such policy and accepting the costs that it entail.

⁷ Prominent contemporary thinkers on American Grand Strategy include Hal Brands, Richard K. Betts, Anne Marie Slaughter, Robert Art, Stephen Walt, John Mearsheimer, and others. See Brands, *American Grand Strategy in the Age of Trump*; Betts, "The Grandiosity of Grand Strategy."; Anne-Marie Slaughter, *The Chessboard and the Web: Strategies of Connection in a Networked World* (New Haven, C.N.: Yale University Press, 2017); Robert J. Art, *A Grand Strategy for America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003); John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, "The Case for Offshore Balancing: A Superior U.S. Grand Strategy," *Foreign Affairs* 95, no. 4 (2016).

⁸ An example of tools for evaluating foreign policy, see David A. Baldwin, "Success and Failure in Foreign Policy," *Annual Review of Political Science* 3 (2000).

Definition of National Objectives and Vital Interest. A grand strategy – like any other policy – is oriented towards achieving *national objectives* which more likely includes the plan to secure *vital interest*. Hence, the first point to assess concerns whether a grand strategy identifies and states the scope of these vital interests. Three propositions are used in assessing the scope of objectives and vital interest: whether the grand strategy defines limited or expanded vital interest; whether the strategy intends to stimulate short term or long term change over its policy targets; and whether the strategy risks negative or positive impacts regarding its overall objective and vital interest.⁹

The Scope of Means and Cost. The second point of assessment involves the means and cost that are likely to be incurred with the grand strategy alternatives. Any policy calculation needs to be accompanied by a balanced cost rationale: whether the cost is feasible for the user and whether such costs could generate the overall net achievement.¹⁰ In addition, the cost calculation on grand strategy alternatives should also consider the likely strategic interaction between the user and its adversary or competitors as a policy target. Any grand strategy that could increase the likely cost imposed to the adversary or competitor – valued in both material and nonmaterial cost – is considered effective.¹¹

The Stake and Willingness. The last point of assessment involves the stakes and willingness of both the policy user and the policy target. Assessing the stakes and willingness involves estimating the level of domestic public support towards

⁹ This point is inspired from David Baldwin's article which acknowledges Robert Dahl's argument that policy may also produce a negative effect in terms of goal attainment. See Baldwin, "Success and Failure in Foreign Policy."; Robert A. Dahl, "The Concept of Power," *Behavioral Science* 2 (1957)..

¹⁰ This point is also taken from Baldwin which quoted Robert Dahl and Charles Lindblom in arguing that any policy should be rationally designed to maximize the net goal achievement to the extent it is also efficient. See *Politics, Economics, and Welfare: Planning and Politico-Economic Systems Resolved into Basic Social Processes* (Chicago, I.L.: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 38-9..

¹¹ Again, foreign policy evaluation advises to look at the likely cost imposed to the target in the overall calculation of cost-effectiveness. See "Success and Failure in Foreign Policy," 175; Robert A. Pape, *Bombing to Win: Air Power and Coercion in War* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996), 197; Thomas C. Schelling, *Choice and Consequence: Perspectives of an Errant Economist* (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press, 1984), 274; Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, *The War Trap* (New Haven, C.T.: Yale University Press, 1981), 90..

the given grand strategy: whether its definition on objectives and vital interest are palatable for domestic public support. It is more likely that domestic support for a particular foreign policy has a negative correlation value with the foreign policy commitment. Meaning that every time the government expands its foreign policy commitment – which in most cases involves military deployments – domestic public support usually dwindles. In addition, like the second criteria, assessing the stakes and willingness over its policy target requires understanding the likely strategic interactions. Some type of grand strategy might induce the target country to harden its domestic resolve.

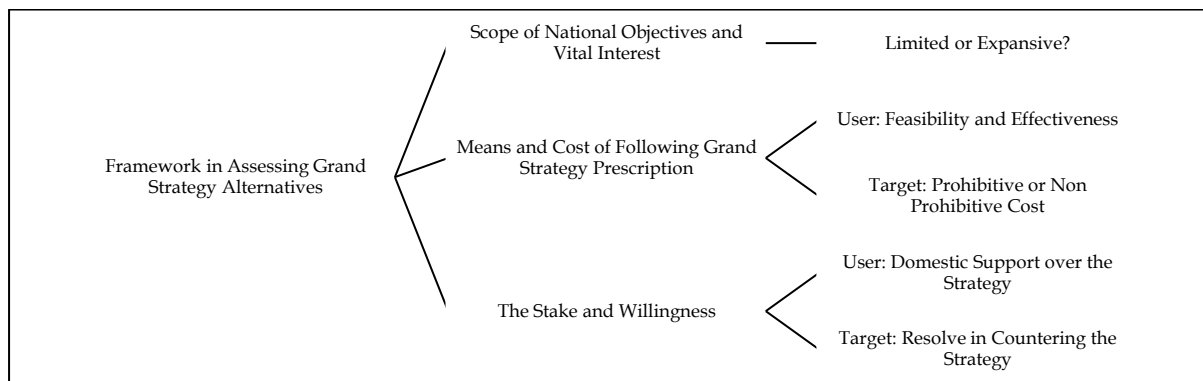


Figure 1. Framework in Assessing Grand Strategy.

Source: Author's design.

All in all, these three points are best summarized in the figure above. The article now proceeds in assessing the U.S. grand strategy alternatives in the following section.

U.S. Grand Strategy Alternatives: Neo-Isolationism to Global Engagement

This section analyses the four U.S. grand strategy alternatives. As previously mentioned, the four U.S. grand strategy alternatives to be assessed are: neo-isolationism, offshore balancing, selective engagement, and deep engagement. We have opted for these four alternatives based on two reasons.¹² First, these

¹² In a 1996 *International Security* article, Barry Posen and Andrew Ross have discussed three of these alternatives: Neo-Isolationism, Selective Engagement, and Primacy (or Deep Engagement). For a

grand strategy alternatives have emerged on various occasions as a potential replacement for the U.S. containment grand strategy (or strategies, if you will) during the Cold War. Second, these alternatives – and their advocates – adequately address U.S. vital interests and elaborate the means to achieve such interests according to each theoretical and empirical underpinning. The article then proceeds with a brief description of the main tenets of these grand strategy alternatives.

Neo-isolationism. The main assumption of the (neo)-isolationism (or disengagement if you will) revolves around the belief that the U.S. has little security interests beyond its borders.¹³ The advocates of neo-isolationism define American vital interest as “the security, liberty, and property of American people”¹⁴ and believe that threats to those vital interests are at best modest. As a result, advocates of neo-isolationism tend to deem any form of U.S. overseas commitment counterproductive and unnecessary. In a recent times, authors have contended whether the Trump administration’s “America First” doctrine has some roots in this isolationism tradition in U.S. foreign policy.¹⁵ Nevertheless, isolationism and its newer forms have reserved their place as one of the U.S. grand strategy alternatives.

Offshore Balancing. The second grand strategy alternative is in contemporary times one of the most popular alternatives among U.S. academics. Its proponents – John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt – argue that offshore

detailed discussion, see Barry R. Posen and Andrew L. Ross, "Competing Visions for U.S. Grand Strategy," *International Security* 21, no. 3 (1996): 6. The idea of offshore balancing was coined relatively at the same time but has seen more vigour recently. See Mearsheimer and Walt, "The Case for Offshore Balancing: A Superior U.S. Grand Strategy."

¹³ Walt, "The Case for Finite Containment: Analyzing U.S. Grand Strategy," 7. Walt summarises the traits of Neo-Isolationism by listing down its advocates which among others includes Earl Ravenal, *NATO: The Tides of Discontent* (Berkeley, C.A.: Institute of International Studies, 1985); Laurence Radway, "Let Europe Be Europe," *World Policy Journal* 1, no. 1 (1983); Eric A. Nordlinger, *Isolationism Reconfigured: American Foreign Policy for a New Century* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995).

¹⁴ The passage is borrowed from Doug Bandow, "Keeping the Troops and the Money at Home," *Current History* 93, no. 579 (1994): 10.

¹⁵ Barry R. Posen, "The Rise of Illiberal Hegemony: Trump's Suprising Grand Strategy," *Foreign Affairs* 97 (2018); Charles A. Kupchan, *Isolationism: A History of America's Efforts to Shield Itself From the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

balancing may become a superior grand strategy alternative because it could set reasonable limits on U.S. foreign policy goals as well as the means to achieve it.¹⁶ Pertaining to U.S. vital interest, Mearsheimer and Walt argue that it needs to include other regions that are crucial for the U.S. economy – particularly those which are industrialized like Europe, Northeast Asia, and the Middle East. In addition, it differs from the “selective engagement” approach – which advocates a U.S. military presence in those three regions. The advocates of offshore balancing argue that the U.S. would only need to deploy its military forces in cases where its allies are unable to balance against the regional hegemon.

Selective Engagement. Theoretically, selective engagement is situated – based on the level of U.S. foreign policy commitment alone – at a midway point between the grand strategy of isolationism and deep engagement. Its proponent, Robert J. Art, starts from the assumption that an alternative grand strategy must be able to set limits on U.S. foreign policy objectives.¹⁷ Like offshore balancing, Art defines U.S. interests in broader terms than advocates of isolationism grand strategy, yet Art’s approach is more limited than deep engagement which he calls a strategy of dominion. However, unlike Mearsheimer and Walt, Art believes that the U.S would require to have a forward deployment stance in Eurasia and the Middle East to secure those vital interests. As a consequence, prescribing selective engagement may cost the U.S. more in terms of sustaining the need for a military presence in those areas. In defending this particular policy choice, Art argues that having a forward-deployed military is cheaper rather than hastily deploying one in an emergency situation. In addition, a U.S. military presence in those regions also would deter likely adversaries and competitors.

Deep Engagement. Deep engagement (or *Primacy* and *Dominion*) perhaps is an alternative that brings with it an avalanche of criticism due to its highly ambitious nature.¹⁸ Administrations that adhere to this grand strategy tend to

¹⁶ Mearsheimer and Walt, "The Case for Offshore Balancing: A Superior U.S. Grand Strategy."

¹⁷ Art, *A Grand Strategy for America*.

¹⁸ The proponents of the above-mentioned grand strategy alternatives point out each and their own

define American national interest in the broadest terms – to maintain U.S. supremacy – and oftentimes seek to define the world in its image. To achieve such goals, the advocates of deep engagement or primacy tend to prescribe a wide array of policies designed to outdistance any global competitors militarily, economically, and politically.¹⁹ In addition, due to its prohibitive cost, adopting such a grand strategy option is hard to defend in the face of the domestic public accountability. Such a grand strategy may also invite a reaction from U.S. adversaries or competitors risking blowback, and with it, greater risks.

Table 1. Comparison on U.S. Grand Strategy Alternatives.

Grand Strategy	Objective and Interest	Means and Cost		Stakes and Commitment		Impact on East Asia
		Policy Users	Policy Targets	Policy Users	Policy Targets	
Neo-Isolationism	At minimum: Designed only to protect mainland U.S. and promote economic prosperity	At a very low cost. Perhaps very costly for U.S. allies.	Almost certain to put small to no cost at all to U.S. adversary and competitors.	No overseas commitment. Allows domestic nation-building. Avert entrapment.	Irrelevant	Likely lead to U.S. retrenchment which would destabilize the balance of power.
Offshore Balancing	Slightly restrictive: Slight commitment over regions of U.S. Vital Interest	Slightly moderate cost for the U.S.	Likely to put the moderate cost for U.S. adversary	Meagre commitment. Align with domestic opinion. Slightly avert entrapment.	Likely to be cautious dealing with vital	Likely to maintain the regional balance of power.

criticism towards this approach, with most calling it unfeasible due to its extremely costly nature which may lead to – as historian Paul Kennedy termed – imperial overstretch. See Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (London: Random House, 1987).

¹⁹ Posen and Ross describe the advocates of primacy tend to believe that U.S. would need to preclude any rising competitors and challengers. See Posen and Ross, "Competing Visions for U.S. Grand Strategy," 32-3.

	(Europe, N.E. Asia, and the Middle East).	and can be quite costly for its allies.	and competitors.		U.S. Interest. (regional hegemon)	
Selective Engagement	Slightly expansive: Expanded commitment (with the military forward deployment) over regions of U.S. Vital Interest (Europe, N.E. Asia, and the Middle East).	High cost, yet manageable for the U.S. Can divert some cost toward U.S. allies.	Likely to put a slightly prohibitive cost on U.S. adversary and competitors.	Moderate commitment. Manageable to defend domestically. Might ensure allies commitment.	Likely to be very cautious. Slightly risky in enhancing adversary and competitor's determination. (regional hegemon)	Likely to maintain the regional balance of power.
Deep Engagement	Very Expansive: Active promotion of western Democracy through extensive military and multilateral diplomatic commitment.	Very costly compared to other strategies. Low cost for U.S. allies.	More likely to put a very prohibitive cost on U.S. adversary and competitors.	Extensive commitment. Hard to defend for the domestic public. Contain risk of allies' entrapment and free riding.	Risk in enhancing adversary and competitor's determination to challenge the U.S. (Terrorist, rogue state, etc.)	Likely to invite adversary or competitor that may disrupt the balance of power.

Source: Authors' design based on the article's framework.

To provide a comparison, these four grand strategies are summarised through the above table based on the criteria outlined in the earlier section. Based

on the information provided above, this article now embarks on estimating the Biden administration's foreign policy and assesses where it fits into the pattern of these alternatives.

The Promise of President Biden's Grand Strategy?

The inauguration of President Biden provided an opportunity for his policy team to undertake a fresh assessment of foreign policy and how it would look like as planners sought to distance the administration from the Trump era. To analyse the case of Biden's foreign policy, this section proceeds in the following manner. First, it would assess whether Biden's campaign promises and the issued policy document present: (1) a distinguishable list of priorities that would serve as U.S. vital interest; (2) a cost rationale on the means of achieving the vital interest; and (3) a pattern of foreign policy commitment that depends on U.S. domestic public support. Second, this section assesses whether Biden's actual foreign policies align with his rhetoric on issues about (1) global competitors and adversaries, as well as (2) the Southeast Asia region.

Upon its inauguration, the Biden-Harris administration faced three imminent challenges on the foreign policy front: it suffered from declining influence across the globe, an imminent challenge from a rising China, and deeply polarised domestic politics. Within days into his administration, President Biden has come up with an Interim National Security Strategic Guidance that represented his political commitment to return the U.S. position as a trusted global leader and to repair its commitment towards its allies. According to the document, the Biden administration defines U.S. national interest by outlining the following priorities: "(1) ...*to protect the security of the American people. (2) ... interest in expanding economic prosperity and opportunity. (3) ... realizing and defending the democratic values at the heart of the American way of life.*"²⁰ Following such delimitations on what constitutes vital interests, the document also stated a set of

²⁰ Biden Jr., Short Interim National Security Strategic Guidance, 9.

means, the priority in using foreign policy tools, and the level of commitment to each key issue. Overall, the document speaks about the Biden administration's intention and willingness to go down the pattern of a *deep engagement* grand strategy, though in a more considered manner.

Hence there is an element of ambiguity over policy direction. This begs the question, what exactly is Biden's actual foreign policy? Soon after enacting the Interim National Security Strategy, the Biden administration started to take on global competitors – both China and Russia alike. On 18-19 March 2021, in its first foray, the administration engaged in official talks with China in Anchorage, Alaska. On the American side, the meeting was attended by Secretary of State Anthony Blinken and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan; while the Chinese side was represented by Member of the Politburo and the highest-ranking foreign policy official, Yang Jiechi and Foreign Minister Wang Yi. The talks which included discussions on sensitive topics including the repression of the Uyghur community in Xinjiang and Taiwan's security, led to an exchange of "angry words" rather than a productive discussion conducive for global stability.²¹ Regarding U.S.-Russia relations, President Biden decided to impose sanctions for its alleged involvement in a cyberattack on SolarWinds's networks. Russian authorities though have denied all allegations of their involvement with the cyberattack.²²

Those two episodes illustrate that the Biden administration will not hold back from using more coercive instruments when addressing the challenge posed by its global competitors. Yet the pattern of U.S. foreign policy commitment remains inconclusive without including other regions and in this context analysing foreign policy actions in the Middle East, South Asia, and other regions of critical importance. For example, the Biden administration maintains a strong

²¹ "US and China Trade Angry Words at High-Level Alaska Talks," *BBC News*, 19 March 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-56452471>.

²² "US imposes sanctions on Russia over cyber-attacks," *BBC News*, 16 April 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-56755484>.

U.S. commitment to the security of Israel as evidenced in its response to recent conflict there at the cost of displaying what some have described as an inability to act decisively as a “good referee” in the conflict between Israel and Hamas.²³ In addition, President Biden had also signalled his plans to end the American military deployment in Afghanistan, a decision that has divided Capitol Hill.²⁴

If these two cases connect well with America’s interest, how about the issues in a region with lesser impact on American vital interests? Consider Southeast Asia: the “hypothetical” ground zero for U.S.-China rivalry. Despite increasing Chinese maritime activity in the South China Sea and a military coup in Myanmar, the Biden administration response and attention towards Southeast Asian has been muted. With regard to the human rights agenda, the Biden administration only placed economic sanctions on the Tatmadaw junta leaders who had perpetrated the coup in Myanmar.²⁵ In addition, despite all the hype, the Biden administration first formal diplomatic talks with ASEAN ministers was something of a damp squib.²⁶ Perhaps President Biden’s indication that he is ready to engage with Southeast Asian leaders in the latter half of this year portends better outcomes for the region.

In sum, it is fair to say that the Biden administration’s actual foreign policy probably fits into the larger pattern of the *selective engagement* grand strategy. With U.S. energies and attention focused on taming its global competitors, regions like Southeast Asia perhaps only serves as a sideshow in American foreign policy. President Biden’s actual foreign policy – in reality is merely the use of *deep engagement* rhetoric – remains poor in its demonstration effect and gives the

²³ Ian Bremmer, "The Ceasefire Between Israel and Hamas Shows How Little Control Biden Has Over the Middle East," *TIME* (23 May 2021). <https://time.com/6050609/ceasefire-israel-hamas-biden/>.

²⁴ "Lawmakers Divided Over Biden’s Plan to Withdraw All Troops from Afghanistan by Sept. 11," *The New York Times*, 25 April 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/04/13/us/biden-news-today>.

²⁵ "Biden Imposes Sanctions on Generals Who Engineered Myanmar Coup," *The New York Times*, 10 February 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/10/us/politics/biden-sanctions-myanmar-coup.html>.

²⁶ Colum Lynch, Jack Detsch, and Robbie Gramer, "The Glitch That Ruined Blinken’s ASEAN Debut," *Foreign Policy* (27 May 2021). <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/05/27/blinken-asean-meeting-pivot-asia-middle-east/>.

impression that Southeast Asia policy is a continuation of Trump era policy and by that extension the region remains one characterised by lower commitment similar to areas of lesser value for U.S. vital interests.

**Conclusion: Anticipating the implication of Biden's Grand Strategy on
Southeast Asia**

This article has compared and analysed the four U.S. grand strategy alternatives in the post-Cold War setting. It also has analysed President Biden's foreign policy promises and practice in the early days of the administration. Out of the four alternatives, Biden's campaign promises demonstrate that he would go down the path of a deep engagement grand strategy, albeit in a more considered manner. However, preliminary assessment of actual foreign policy paints a different picture highlighting that Biden's commitment was lesser than what he intended: President Biden would appear to walk the path of selective engagement, with less attention to regions that do not fall into the realm of vital interests.

For Southeast Asian countries, this pattern could have two interpretations. First, because the Biden administration would seem to focus on taming global competitors, Southeast Asian countries would not need to worry about regional stability and could retain their strategic space. Due to changes in tone and tenor of U.S.-China engagement – as compared to the Trump presidency – it could be safe to presume that the Biden administration will engage China more cautiously and any ripple effects will not overtly change the strategic dynamic. Second, precisely because the U.S. has maintained its focus on taming global competitors, Southeast Asian countries can focus on finding new avenues for cooperation without the need to worry about external interference. Overall, Southeast Asian countries should be able to anticipate the Biden administration's likely pattern of engagement and benefit well from such a situation.

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