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**Joe Biden's Foreign Policy: What to Expect from the United States in the  
Indo Pacific**

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# Joe Biden's Foreign Policy: What to Expect from the United States in the Indo Pacific

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## Abstract

Joseph Biden came to the Oval Office with his wealth of experience in government affairs, including as the United States Senate Foreign Relations Committee chair. According to his campaign promises, Biden's administration's foreign policy would be aimed at improving the US' international credibility based on liberal values. This article will further examine his political aspirations, based on his speech, campaign promises, and official statements. The argument is that although the US would be likely to embrace liberal values under his administration, structural constraints may limit his ability in foreign policy agenda-setting. It is unlikely that his policies will diverge significantly from those of his predecessor, Donald Trump. Building upon the power transition theory, this paper argues that intense rivalry with China may shape US policy in the Indo-Pacific.

**Keywords:** Foreign policy; Joseph Biden; power transition theory; the United States.

## Abstrak

*Joseph Biden terpilih menjadi presiden Amerika Serikat dengan memiliki banyak pengalaman di urusan pemerintahan, termasuk sebagai Ketua Komite Senat Hubungan Luar Negeri Amerika Serikat. Mengacu pada janji kampanyenya, kebijakan luar negeri pemerintahan Biden akan ditujukan untuk memulihkan kredibilitas internasional AS berdasarkan pada nilai-nilai liberalisme. Artikel ini akan membahas aspirasi politik Biden melalui pidato, janji politik selama kampanye, serta pernyataan-pernyataan resminya. Artikel ini berpendapat bahwa meskipun AS cenderung mendorong nilai-nilai liberalisme dalam kebijakan luar negerinya, hambatan-hambatan yang berdimensi internasional dapat mengurangi kemampuan ia dalam menentukan agenda kebijakan luar negerinya. Kebijakannya nampaknya tidak berbeda secara signifikan dengan Presiden Donald Trump yang sebelumnya berkuasa. Mengacu pada teori transisi kekuasaan, persaingan antara AS dan Tiongkok mungkin berdampak pada kebijakan AS di Indo-Pasifik.*

**Kata kunci:** Politik luar negeri; Joseph Biden; teori transisi kekuasaan; Amerika Serikat.

## Introduction

Joseph R. Biden (Joe Biden) gave a victory speech on November 8, 2020, after being elected the 46<sup>th</sup> president of the United States (the US hereinafter). Within a few weeks, the former vice president presented his foreign policy team in Wilmington, Delaware, which consisted of seasoned officials and advisors. The team immediately adopted a tone distinct from that of former President Donald Trump, in regard to the foundations of America's global leadership, the significance of human rights, and the value of multilateralism. To be noted, Trump was well known for his unpredictability when it comes to foreign policy.<sup>1</sup> One of Trump's foreign policy signatures, for example, was his inward-looking tendency.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Dwi Ardiyanti, "Imprediktibilitas Kebijakan Luar Negeri Amerika Serikat: Tantangan dan Ancaman Rezim Donald Trump Terhadap ASEAN." *Jurnal Ilmiah Hubungan Internasional* 13, no. 2 (2017): 105-117.

<sup>2</sup> Ahmad Sahide, "Proteksionisme Trump dan Masa Depan Supremasi Politik AS." *Jurnal Ilmiah Hubungan Internasional* 17, no. 1 (2021): 1-16.

This paper aims to highlight Biden's political outlook and main concerns, which may influence his foreign policy in the coming years. Using secondary data sources, such as documents, speeches, and Biden and his team's public statements, it will examine his foreign policy approach. The main argument is that the Biden administration's foreign policy is more of a continuation than a change from that of his predecessor. It suggests that while Biden's presidency would result in several changes to US foreign policy, it would not be a game-changer.

Biden's predecessor, Donald Trump, showed the idea of narrow-minded nationalism as presented by his "America First" slogan. Trump's rhetoric exhibited an isolationist approach to world politics, including how it neglected international institutions and American global military presence.<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, his administration abandoned the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) agenda and withdrew from the Paris Climate Agreement and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). In his view, US sovereign rights heavily outweigh its international commitments.

Joe Biden's essay on *Foreign Affairs* in January 2020 may give us some hints on how his leadership will take shape. In the article, he underlines the significance of American democracy as "the engine of our ingenuity" and as "the heart of who we are and how we see the world." Moreover, he also emphasizes the commitment to "renew our core values" and willingness "to lead the world again." He also believes that now, democracy is "under more pressure" than ever before, so the US needs to invite other democratic countries to bring it back on the global agenda.<sup>4</sup> Biden's promise, however, appears to be more of a political rhetoric than a substantive departure from his predecessor.

Biden has already introduced his foreign policy team to achieve his goals. He turned to familiar faces, a group of experienced foreign policy experts – also known as "the Blob" – as the first few members of his staff. The term "Blob" was coined by Ben Rhodes, a former Deputy National Security Adviser under President Obama, to describe a group of foreign policy establishment who have worked in the government from time to time.<sup>5</sup> Biden picked Anthony Blinken, his long-time advisor who also worked under the Obama administration, as the Secretary of State. Jake Sullivan, Biden's choice of the National Security Advisor, is also a top aide to Biden and former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. The other cabinet members include Avril Haines as Director of National Intelligence, the UN Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield, and General (ret.) Llyod Austin as Secretary of Defence. Finally, Biden also appointed John Kerry, a former US Secretary of State, as the first-ever special presidential envoy for climate change.

This article opens with a conceptual framework of power transition theory. The idea suggests that parity and discontent among superpowers might increase the risk of conflict. In addition, it will analyse how Biden's foreign policy differs from that of his predecessor. However, during the early years of his presidency, his policy demonstrates more continuity than considerable change from Donald Trump.

## Literature Review

According to the Power Transition Theory, the existing power hierarchy consists of a "dominant state", "great powers", "middle powers", and "small powers". Organski utilised a pyramid as a metaphor for the distribution of power, with the most powerful countries above and the least

<sup>3</sup> Adam Quinn, "The world according to Trump". *The World Today*, 72(6), 12-15. (2016).

<sup>4</sup> Joe Biden. "Why America Must Lead Again". [online] *Foreign Affairs*. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-01-23/why-america-must-lead-again>, Accessed 27 November 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Johannes Lang, "Biden, the Middle East, and the Restoration of the "Blob"". *Harvard Political Review*. Retrieved 13 December 2020, from <https://harvardpolitics.com/biden-the-middle-east-and-the-restoration-of-the-blob/>

powerful at the base.<sup>6</sup> The dominant state, as the most powerful in the system, tends to exploit the international order to serve its own interests. In addition, the theory also predicts that war between great countries can occur when it is dissatisfied with the existing international order. When great powers are content with the current international order, it is unlikely that they will engage in a major conflict.<sup>7</sup>

Peace is best kept when there is an imbalance of national capacities between disadvantaged and advantaged states<sup>8</sup>. However, the main idea is not primarily centred on power parity. States that do not benefit from the international system may want to challenge the dominant state for the role of leadership, but governments that profit from the status quo will be satisfied with the current order. Therefore, the challenger should maintain power parity with the dominant state to alter the current international order. According to the idea of power transition, the dominant state would attempt to maintain its superiority by intercepting these actions.

However, when great powers are generally satisfied with the current order, major war seems unlikely. Organski claimed that a state might be comfortable with the existing international order provided it provides them with the best opportunity to achieve their goals.<sup>9</sup> As the dominant state manages the international system's rules and laws, it is always satisfied. However, great powers can be a challenger to the dominant power whenever it is dissatisfied.

The current relationship between the United States and China meets the criteria. China's development poses a threat to the United States, the world's current dominating power. Moreover, the Indo-Pacific has been the major arena of competition between the US and China as great powers in the twenty-first century. In this region, Washington and Beijing are directly involved in several military flashpoints, including North Korea, the South China Sea, the East China Sea, and Taiwan. On the one hand, the threat posed by a growing economy and military may eventually result in a power shift in the international order, as the rising economy seeks greater political influence; on the other hand, the US will go to any lengths to prevent China from challenging its position as the world's dominant power.

## Analysis

### a. Joe Biden's Foreign Policy Ideas

Joe Biden participated in diplomatic affairs during his early days of being a Senator in 1973 when he served as the US Senate Foreign Affairs Committee chair. During his term in the Senate, he was involved in several issues and legislations pertaining to international security, terrorism, and weapons of mass destruction. A few decades later, as President Barack Obama's deputy, he played a part in ending the Iraq war in 2011. The then Vice President visited Baghdad to formally evacuate the US troops, ending American military presence nearly nine years after the invasion in 2003.

Biden's ideas on foreign policy views align with the Democratic Party core principles, which emphasize the need to "renew and reinvent" partnerships and alliances to meet global challenges. According to the Democratic Party's foreign policy platform, America's alliances exist to "multiply our influence, spread our reach, lighten our burden, and advance our shared interests and priorities." It further elaborates how international institutions made since the end of World War II gave "an enormous return on our investment", and "its renovation is a critical diplomatic priority."<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup> AFK Organski, "World Politics", New York: Alfred Knopf. (1958). p. 305

<sup>7</sup> J Kugler et al. "The Power Transition: A Retrospective and Prospective Evaluation" in Manus I Midlarsky, *Handbook of War Studies*, 1898, Boston: Unwin Hyman, P. 190

<sup>8</sup> AFK Organski and Kugler, "The War Ledger", Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. (1980)

<sup>9</sup> AFK Organski, *Op.Cit.* (1958)

<sup>10</sup> Demconvention.com. Retrieved 10 December 2020, from <https://www.demconvention.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/2020-07-31-Democratic-Party-Platform-For-Distribution.pdf>

Moreover, Joe Biden emphasizes American leadership, democracy, human rights, and environmental justice. During the 2020 presidential campaign, he mentioned several foreign policy priorities, including to defend America's vital interests, to end wars in Afghanistan and the Middle East, to elevate diplomacy, to restore international partnerships, to renew commitments to arms control, and to lead the world in addressing the climate crisis.<sup>11</sup> He also made it clear that his foreign policy offers a stark contrast to Trump's approach, particularly in his commitments to international cooperation.

Soon after announcing his victory in the election, the President-elect held a phone call to US allies in the Asia-Pacific, including the leaders of Japan, Australia, and South Korea.<sup>12</sup> He wanted to send a message and reassure these allied countries about US commitment to the region. Biden realized the fact that he will become a president during a relative decline in America's political influence, and the US cannot solve all the world's problems by itself. He will embrace pragmatic multilateralism in managing current affairs, such as climate change and the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

On the campaign trail, Biden promised to restore American leadership role and advance security, prosperity, and values by renewing its democracy and alliances across the globe. He mentioned some of the usual liberal rhetoric, such as promoting democracy, the rule of law, human rights, environmental protection, and multilateral diplomacy. Furthermore, Biden also stated that the "United States must lead not just with the example of power, but the power of our example."<sup>13</sup> The former vice president wanted to improve US soft power globally.

Unlike President Trump, Joe Biden puts the fight against climate change as one of his top priorities when he takes office. While Trump repeatedly said that the Paris Accord was harmful to US interests, Biden has already announced his plan of returning to the pact. He believed that international agreement is designed to prevent the further impact of global warming. Moreover, Biden has also described his ambitious plan to make electricity production carbon-free by 2035 and net-zero emission by 2050. He is convinced that the US would be able to persuade world leaders into joining America's efforts to have a clean energy economy.<sup>14</sup>

In managing the coronavirus pandemic, Biden asserted that his administration would also follow the guidelines and recommendations made by scientists and health experts. His seven points plan to bring the COVID-19 under control includes the plan to "re-joining the WHO" to support international collaboration in handling the issue.<sup>15</sup> Previously, the Trump administration decided to quit the organization after he criticized the agency's failure to prevent the COVID-19 outbreak and accused it of becoming a puppet for the Chinese government. Nonetheless, it seems likely that the US will act more responsibly and can be reasoned with under Biden's administration.

Biden's ultimate challenge, however, might be restoring the world's confidence in the US ability. President Trump's withdrawal from many international agreements has had a detrimental impact on the US credibility around its friends and allies. For example, US withdrawal from the Paris accord is seen as abandoning global leadership, as many European and Asian leaders have already

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<sup>11</sup> *American Leadership | Joe Biden*. Joe Biden for President: Official Campaign Website. (2020). Retrieved 10 December 2020, from <https://joebiden.com/americanleadership/>.

<sup>12</sup> Shin, H., Murakami, S., & Lewis, S. (2020, November 12). Biden reassures U.S. allies in calls with leaders of Japan, South Korea, Australia. Retrieved December 12, 2020, from <https://www.reuters.com/article/usa-election-asia-allies/biden-reassures-u-s-allies-in-calls-with-leaders-of-japan-south-korea-australia-idUSKBN27S0EV>

<sup>13</sup> Joe Biden, "*American Leadership | Joe Biden*". Joe Biden for President: Official Campaign Website. Retrieved 3 December 2020, from <https://joebiden.com/americanleadership/> Retrieved December 12, 2020

<sup>14</sup> *9 Key Elements of Joe Biden's Plan for a Clean Energy Revolution | Joe Biden for President: Official Campaign Website*. Joe Biden for President: Official Campaign Website. (2020). Retrieved 6 December 2020, from <https://joebiden.com/9-key-elements-of-joe-bidens-plan-for-a-clean-energy-revolution/>

<sup>15</sup> Jamie Ducharme, *What Is Biden's Plan for Stopping COVID-19?*. Time. Retrieved 6 December 2020, from <https://time.com/5905502/biden-covid-19-plan/>

noted.<sup>16</sup> Politically, the situation also allows China and the European Union to take charge of the global climate regime and increase their reputation.<sup>17</sup> In this regard, President Biden should be able to restore US leadership through various engagement at the global level.

### b. Sino-US Competition

Political tensions between the US and China have escalated in the last few years. The conflict between the two is even recognized in the official documents of both countries. According to the US 2017 National Security Strategy, for example, Washington sees Beijing as “a strategic rival that challenges American power, influence, and interests.”<sup>18</sup> The document also described the relationship between the two as “one great power competition.” It seems likely that China’s increasing profile as a new economic and military powerhouse has created anxieties in the dominant power.

The two great powers have also hit a rough patch on the economic front. During the Trump’s administration, both countries were involved in a “trade war”, which began after the US president imposed trade sanctions on Chinese goods to cut back what he called as unfair trade practices and intellectual property theft. From a financial standpoint, the US suffered a huge trade deficit of around \$419 billion a year, with intellectual property theft of an extra \$240 billion.<sup>19</sup> The large bilateral trade deficit made the US vulnerable and dependent on China, enough for Trump’s administration to give Beijing the cold shoulder.

While the US used the sanctions as an instrument to handle Beijing’s unjust economic practices, the Chinese tend to perceive it to undermine their legitimacy. According to China’s official document released by the State Council Information Office in 2019, the extra tariff implemented by the US government is “undermining market confidence and economic stability in the two countries and globally.”<sup>20</sup> *Qiushi*, an official journal of the Chinese Communist Party, warned that the friction between the two superpowers can pose a challenge to “China’s economic growth, financial stability, trade and investment, employment and people’s livelihoods.”<sup>21</sup>

Biden would continue to face the same situation. Alternatively, he might try to soften the image of US unilateralism approach adopted by Trump’s administration. In his *Foreign Affairs* article, Biden mentions that to deal with China effectively, the US need to build a “united front of allies and partners to confront Beijing’s abusive behaviour and human rights violations.” In an interview, Jake Sullivan also made a similar statement, saying that Biden’s administration will invest in current US alliance systems to address the China challenge.<sup>22</sup> From this point of view, the new administration will likely continue with tough policy toward the rising power, similarly to what President Trump did during his presidency.

The continuation of US engagement on the Indo-Pacific alliance system against China would be the possible scenario. As a geographic concept, “Indo-Pacific” refers to a broad maritime space that interlinks the Indian and the Pacific Ocean. Accordingly, the adoption of the Indo-Pacific is a soft

<sup>16</sup> Zhang, Y., Chao, Q., Zheng, Q., & Huang, L. (2017). The withdrawal of the U.S. from the Paris Agreement and its impact on global climate change governance. *Advances in Climate Change Research*, 8(4), 213-219. doi:10.1016/j.accre.2017.08.005

<sup>17</sup> Kemp, L. (2017). Better out than in. *Nature Climate Change*, 7(7), 458-460. <https://doi.org/10.1038/nclimate3309>

<sup>18</sup> The White House. (2017). *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (pp. 1-55). Washington DC.

<sup>19</sup> Congressional Research Service. (2018). *China-US Trade Issues*. Federation of American Scientists. Retrieved from <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL33536.pdf>

<sup>20</sup> Full text: *China's Position on the China-US Economic and Trade Consultations - Xinhua | English.news.cn*. Xinhuanet.com.

(2019). Retrieved 31 December 2020, from [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-06/02/c\\_138110404.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-06/02/c_138110404.htm).

<sup>21</sup> *China Party journal warns of trade war's impact on financial stability*. FR. (2020). Retrieved 2 January 2021, from <https://fr.reuters.com/article/us-usa-china-trade-idUSKCN1LH3B8>.

<sup>22</sup> Dozier & Hennigan, *Donald Trump's Foreign Policy Leaves Behind Destruction — and Opportunity — for Joe Biden*. Time.

Retrieved 2 January 2021, from <https://time.com/5917389/joe-biden-foreign-policy/>.

balancing by the US and its allies in Asia, which was motivated by a common maritime challenge from Beijing.<sup>23</sup> In Southeast and East Asia, China's military assertiveness can be seen with the contested waters of East China and the South China Sea. Growing tensions in both areas have put Washington on high alert to deal with China's ambitions.

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), a strategic platform uniting four democratic countries – the US, Australia, Japan, and India – shall continue to serve as an instrument to keep Beijing in check. China's rising naval capabilities and the US search for allies have been translated into stronger cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>24</sup> The first Malabar exercise was conducted in the Bay of Bengal in 2017, combining armed forces from the US, India, Japan, and Australia, while the second phase was concluded in the Arabian Sea on November 20<sup>th</sup>, 2020.<sup>25</sup> As the Japanese military chief Admiral Katsushi Kawano noted, the Quad is meant as a collective mechanism to “deter Chinese provocations.”<sup>26</sup> In other words, the four members share the same concern about China's behaviour which is threatening and contradicts international law.

In respective congratulatory calls with India, Australia, and Japan leaders, Biden used the term “Indo-Pacific” instead of the old “Asia Pacific” when referring to the region. The language used by the former vice president could be a sign of the recognition of the Indo-Pacific approach from the previous administration.<sup>27</sup> On another occasion, Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga confirmed to the press that Biden is looking forward to working together with Japan on “achieving free and open Indo-Pacific.”<sup>28</sup>

Therefore, it seems likely that the rivalry between the United States and China will continue during Biden's presidency. In the coming years, the fight for global primacy will likely be a major element in US foreign policy. At a time when the relative dominance of the United States is falling and China's rise is consistent, the Biden's administration would likely focus on preserving leadership in the Indo-Pacific region. Additionally, he put a greater priority on maintaining and expanding regional institutions and military alliances.

### c. Biden's Indo-Pacific Strategy

The Indo-Pacific strategy of the United States during the Biden administration emphasises a multilateral approach and strengthening alliances. For example, President Biden has assured that the China-claimed East China Sea and Senkaku Islands are covered by the US-Japan defence treaty. The March 2021 Joint Statement reiterated a commitment to “enhance deterrence” and “response capabilities” between the two countries in the face of challenging security problems.<sup>29</sup> Anthony Blinken, the Secretary of State of the United States, has also issued a written statement confirming the US-Philippines defence treaty against Philippine assaults in the South China Sea.<sup>30</sup> These two actions

<sup>23</sup> Scott, D. (2012). The “Indo-Pacific”—New Regional Formulations and New Maritime Frameworks for US-India Strategic Convergence. *Asia-Pacific Review*, 19(2), 85-109. 5

<sup>24</sup> Mohan, C. (2010). Rising India: Partner in Shaping the Global Commons?. *The Washington Quarterly*, 33(3), 133-148.

<sup>25</sup> Johnson, J. (2020). *Malabar military exercises with 'Quad' nations begin in message to China*. The Japan Times. Retrieved 2 January 2021, from <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2020/11/04/asia-pacific/malabar-military-exercises-china-quad/>.

<sup>26</sup> Joshi Paul. *The Quad: A Soft Balancing Mechanism in Asia*. South Asian Voices. Retrieved 2 January 2021, from <https://southasianvoices.org/soft-balancing-asia/>.

<sup>27</sup> Sebastian Strangio, *Is Biden Preparing to Tweak the Indo-Pacific Strategy?*. Retrieved 2 January 2021, from <https://thediplomat.com/2020/11/is-biden-preparing-to-tweak-the-indo-pacific-strategy/>

<sup>28</sup> Can Joe Biden turn around Trump's China policy in the Indo-Pacific? | DW | 12.11.2020. (2020). Retrieved 2 January 2021, from <https://www.dw.com/en/can-joe-biden-turn-around-trumps-china-policy-in-the-indo-pacific/a-55578701>

<sup>29</sup> The White House, US-Japan Joint Leaders' Statement: “US-Japan Global Partnership for a New Era”, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/04/16/u-s-japan-joint-leaders-statement-u-s-japan-global-partnership-for-a-new-era/>

<sup>30</sup> Reuters, “US repeats warning to China Against Attack on Philippine Forces”, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/us-repeats-warning-china-against-attack-philippine-forces-2021-07-12/>

may have conveyed a strong message to Beijing regarding the United States' commitment to its key allies.

In addition, the United States has formed a trilateral defence agreement with the United Kingdom and Australia on 15 September 2021. Prior to the formation, Canberra cancelled a contract with the French navy to acquire 12 diesel submarines, opting for nuclear submarines provided by the US or the UK. Moreover, AUKUS would also promote cooperation in cyber security, information sharing, quantum technologies, and more undersea capabilities.<sup>31</sup> Using this framework, the United States may also have access to and a presence in Australia and Asia, which is likely to cause China legitimate concern. This defence pact indicated a 'hard balancing' strategy towards Beijing.<sup>32</sup> China condemned the formation of AUKUS for 'undermining peace and stability' and said that it would 'intensified the arms race' in Asia.

Biden's Indo-Pacific strategy seeks to limit China's ambition for leadership in the region. In the South China Sea, for instance, the US navy intends to strengthen military cooperation with a network of military partners and allies, especially in the form of freedom of navigation patrols in contested regions. US Freedom of Navigations (FONOP) seeks to contest "illegal and expansive maritime claims that are inconsistent with customary international law."<sup>33</sup> Joint FONOP operations are intended to contest Beijing's claim to maritime rights in the South China Sea.

Consistent with the Power Transition Theory, Biden's focus in the Indo-Pacific is how to constrain Beijing's influence. While President Trump chose to walk away from regional institutions and military alliance, Biden's multilateralist approach means that his administration would be more likely to rely on US' friends and allies. As the dominant power, the United States would aim to maintain its influence in multilateral institutions such as the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD). The United States holds 17.43 percent of the total voting power at the International Monetary Fund, giving it veto authority over policy decisions.<sup>34</sup> In addition to establishing the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD), the United States is the largest shareholder of the World Bank. To sustain the present order, the United States may employ a comprehensive approach, including military, diplomatic, and economic measures, to contain the rise of China.

#### **d. Possible Relations with Indonesia**

Joe Biden views that Indonesia has a strategic value for the United States. As a vice president, he came to Jakarta in October 2015, praising Indonesia as the home to the world's largest Muslim population, and one of the most diverse countries.<sup>35</sup> Biden's positive view on Indonesia also stood out in the Democratic Party debate on 2019, claiming that the US should repair the alliance "with Japan and South Korea, Australia and Indonesia."<sup>36</sup> Given Indonesia's importance, President Biden would be very keen to enhance bilateral relations between the two democratic countries.

Indonesia may be in a strategic position to perform the role of mediator in convincing the possible competitor to be more content with the present status quo. According to Kim, when the

<sup>31</sup> The White House, "Joint Leaders Statement on AUKUS", <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/09/15/joint-leaders-statement-on-aucus/>

<sup>32</sup> Derek McDougall, "AUKUS: implications for Australia and other Commonwealth countries in the Indo-Pacific" The Round Table. (2021).

<sup>33</sup> Smith, Jeff, "Biden Must Keep Challenging China on Freedom of Navigation" <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/02/16/biden-south>

<sup>34</sup> Congressional Research Service, "International Monetary Fund", available at <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/misc/IF10676.pdf>

<sup>35</sup> Niruban Balachandran and William Turchello, "Indonesia and potential US president Biden". Retrieved 2 January 2021, from <https://www.thejakartapost.com/academia/2020/08/21/indonesia-and-potential-us-president-biden.html>

<sup>36</sup> Jeff Greenfield, One Important Thing Biden Just Figured Out. Retrieved 4 January 2021, from <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2019/12/19/biden-finds-his-footing-now-can-he-keep-it-088554>



middle power is strategically positioned between two competing great powers, its strategic importance to both the dissatisfied challenger (China) and the dominant state (the US) would expand considerably.<sup>37</sup> In other words, Jakarta might play a crucial role in preserving the status quo while receiving security assurance from the US.

In Jakarta, Biden's victory was welcomed with open arms. Based on a public poll conducted in October 2020, most of Indonesians preferred Joe Biden to win the US presidential election than President Trump, winning a favourability of 63% by 12%.<sup>38</sup> The same survey also found that most Indonesian respondents believed that Joe Biden would be a good president for the US, with a 33% of them saying that he would be a "great" leader, while around 53% believed that President Biden would bring a "very positive" impact to Indonesia/Southeast Asia.<sup>39</sup>

While remains optimistic, Jakarta would maintain the hedging approach towards Washington and Beijing. As an alternative strategy to balancing and bandwagoning, hedging is the "middle ground" that avoids having to choose one side at the expense of another.<sup>40</sup> The strategy may combine military and economic approach to reduce imbalances against more powerful countries. While Indonesia is becoming more reliant on China's economy, Jakarta could also benefit from strong security ties with the US.

Furthermore, Indonesia can also use regional institutions, such as ASEAN, to improve its relations with the US under the Biden administration. Jakarta may benefit from Biden's preference to multilateralism and priority to the Indo-Pacific. At the ASEAN special summit, the US President declared this commitment to establish the "comprehensive strategic partnership" between the US and ASEAN.<sup>41</sup> The collaboration extends across sectors: COVID-19, economic ties, subregional development, people-to-people connectivity, technology, climate change, security, as well as maritime cooperation.

Another subject between Indonesia and the current US government might be related to human rights issues. In the interview with *New York Times*, Biden has already declared that human rights "will be the core of the US foreign policy."<sup>42</sup> Additionally, the "Leahy Law" also prohibits the US Department of State and the Department of Defence from assisting or providing military assistance to foreign security forces with a record of human rights violations. The law is also meant to strengthen human rights protection at the international level.

Human rights concern in Papua is one of the many issues that require special attention from Jakarta. Back in 2002, bilateral relations between Indonesia and the US were severely affected after the murder of two American citizens in Papua, causing the US Congress to restrict military aid to the Indonesian Army. The incident set off a joint US-Indonesian investigation, which concluded that Anthonius Wamang, a Papuan villager, was primarily responsible for the attack. Because of the

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<sup>37</sup> Kim Woosang, "Korea as a middle power in the Northeast Asian Security Environment". In Ikenberry G and Moon C (eds). "The United States and Northeast Asia: Debates, Issues, and New Order". New York, NY: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, p. 123-141.

<sup>38</sup> Matthew Smith, "Who do people in Asia-Pacific want to win the US presidential election?" | YouGov. Retrieved 4 January 2021, from <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2020/10/15/who-do-people-asia-pacific-want-win-us-presidentialia>

<sup>39</sup> YouGov. "2020 US presidential election: view from Asia-Pacific" (p. 2). [yougov.co.uk](https://docs.cdn.yougov.com/pcjegign8n/YouGov%20-%202020%20US%20presidential%20election%20view%20from%20Asia.pdf). Retrieved from <https://docs.cdn.yougov.com/pcjegign8n/YouGov%20-%202020%20US%20presidential%20election%20view%20from%20Asia.pdf>

<sup>40</sup> Evelyn Goh, "Meeting the China challenge: The US in Southeast Asian regional security strategies", Washington DC: East-West Studies. (2005).

<sup>41</sup> The White House, "Fact Sheet: New Initiatives to Expand the US-ASEAN Strategic Partnership", <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/10/26/fact-sheet-new-initiatives-to-expand-the-u-s-asean-strategic-partnership/>

<sup>42</sup> *Joe Biden - Foreign Policy*. Nytimes.com. (2021). Retrieved 6 January 2021, from <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/us/politics/joe-biden-foreign-policy.html>.

incident, the Indonesian Army faced strong criticisms from human rights activists at home and abroad.<sup>43</sup>

While noticing that civilian authorities sustained control over military forces, the United States annual Country Report on Human Rights Practices of 2019 found plenty of issues that need to be addressed by Jakarta.<sup>44</sup> For example, the report states that “security personnel used excessive force that resulted in deaths during arrests, investigations, crowd control, and other operations.” The document also added that while the central government officially promotes racial and ethnic tolerance, religious majorities tend to act discriminatory against minorities in some areas in Indonesia. Accordingly, to have fruitful relations with Washington, Indonesia needs to reaffirm its commitments to democracy and human rights protection.

## Conclusion

This article points out Biden's main concerns that may form his foreign policy approach. Based on his campaign promises, it is likely that he would bring several changes to US foreign policy, particularly in terms of international cooperation. Unlike Donald Trump, Biden's vision on foreign policy represents liberal ideas, including the protection of human rights, the promotion of democracy, public health, and climate change. Furthermore, his foreign policy plan aims to strengthen relations with US traditional allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific. In accordance with the Power Transition Theory, Biden's priority in the Indo-Pacific is to limit Beijing's influence. In contrast to President Trump's decision to withdraw from regional institutions and military alliances, President Biden's outlook suggests that his government would be more inclined to rely on US partners.

However, the article also argues that in dealing with China, President Biden would face political realities and be likely to adopt a similar approach to his predecessor. Using power transition theory as a tool, this article analyses how US foreign policy is likely to be driven by the great power rivalry between the US and China. Under Trump's leadership, Washington had an intense rivalry with Beijing over military dominance in Asia. Because of this, Biden is unlikely to leave the ‘anti-China’ coalition that he inherited from the previous administration. The Quad alliance could still likely be solidified as a strategic instrument to balance China's military assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific with ongoing conflicts in East China and the South China Sea.

Indonesia, as a middle power, could play a strategic role in navigating great power rivalry in the Indo-Pacific. While maintaining positive relations with Beijing and Washington, Jakarta could opt for a hedging strategy to combine military and economic approaches to address imbalances with great powers. In addition, Indonesia can utilize regional institutions such as ASEAN to boost its relations with the United States during the Biden administration. Jakarta could benefit from Biden's preference for multilateralism and his strong interest in the Indo-Pacific. Additionally, in regard to its relations with the US, Jakarta should also be mindful of human rights issues in the country.

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<sup>43</sup> Criminal Collaborations? Antonius Wamang and the Indonesian Military in Timika

<sup>44</sup> U.S. Embassy and Consulates in Indonesia. (2019). *2019 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Indonesia*. Retrieved from <https://id.usembassy.gov/2019-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices-indonesia/>

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