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THE RECALIBRATION OF CHINA'S GRAND STRATEGY DURING THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION

Abstract

Amid the continuous rise of China's diplomatic, technological, military, economic, and normative power, in the context of the transition to multipolarity, Washington has expanded its competition and rivalry with Beijing under the Joseph Biden administration. In addition to Donald Trump's "tariff wars," Biden's presidency presented elements of a "containment 2.0" policy, upgraded with a strong liberal internationalist discourse on the need to uphold the "rules-based world order" (RBO) and a Manichean "democracy vs. autocracy" narrative. It led to boosting the RBO narrative against "authoritarian states," building alliances against the Russian Federation and China, and new formats of securitization of globalization and weaponization of the global value chain. Beijing thus faced the Biden administration in a complex geopolitical environment and had to adapt its grand strategy. In response to the RBO, China proposed "true multilateralism." Faced with a host of new "mini-alliances" in the Asia-Pacific, China boosted its military prowess. Beyond the region,

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Beijing pursued the expansion of existing (Belt and Road Initiative, Shanghai Cooperation Organization, BRICS) and new multilateral initiatives (Global Development Initiative, Global Security Initiative, Global Development Initiative). China demonstrated resilience and strategic foresight, while the agility and coherence of its evolving grand strategy have allowed Beijing to “welcome back” Donald Trump into the White House with readiness and self-confidence despite a “rocky road ahead”.

Keywords: China, Grand Strategy, USA, Biden, Trump, foreign policy, international politics

INTRODUCTION

The administration of U.S. President Joseph Biden (2021–2025) has built on the approaches of President Donald Trump’s first mandate in the White House (2017–2021) to expand competition and rivalry with the People’s Republic of China. Beyond the “tariff wars” and technological competition, Biden’s administration has focused on (re) building military, political, and economic alliances, particularly in the Asia-Pacific. Such progression, aimed at containing and deterring China’s growing influence, has compelled Beijing to recalibrate its grand strategy. The evolution of China’s grand strategy during the Biden administration thus presents a complex interplay of adaptation and response to U.S. geopolitical manoeuvres. This paper explores the concept of hesitant hegemony, positing that China’s grand strategy is increasingly poised to counter U.S. challenges, particularly in light of the ongoing trade war and the formation of mini-alliances across Asia and the Asia-Pacific. The argument is framed around China’s readiness to navigate the shifting dynamics initiated by both the Trump and Biden administrations, adapting its strategies to maintain its influence and safeguard its interests. This includes enhancing regional partnerships, expanding existing multilateral initiatives, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and BRICS, but also proposing new global initiatives, such as the Global Development Initiative (GDI), the Global Security Initiative (GSI) and the Global Civilisation Initiative (GCI). The analysis will explore how

China's strategic narrative has evolved, reflecting its readiness to absorb shocks and adapt to new geopolitical realities.

This paper is organized into three main sections. The first section explores the concept of Grand Strategy (GS) within the context of the emerging multipolar world order, emphasizing the evolution of China's GS since the establishment of the People's Republic. It identifies the key components of China's GS within the contemporary international system, in which the United States perceives China as a strategic challenger. The second section examines the evolution of U.S. China policy under the Biden administration and contrasts them with those of the Trump administration's first term. The third section analyses China's responses to these varying policies and examines its strategic adaptation to shifting international circumstances. Beyond Beijing's reactions to U.S. "alliance-building" in the Asia-Pacific, key themes include China's visions of "true multipolarity" and its global initiatives aimed at expanding global development and the role of the Global South, the maintenance of strategic partnership with the Russian Federation amid the conflict in Ukraine, energy security amid the conflict in the Middle East and trade partnership with the European Union amid calls for de-risking and de-coupling. These are embedded in China's strategic narrative, which views the Western-led "rules-based world order" as a threat to the UN Charter, an obstacle to global development and trade, and incompatible with "great changes unseen in a century." The paper concludes with implications of the evolution of China's GS for Sino-American relations during the Trump 2.0 U.S. presidency from 2025 on.

EVOLUTION OF CHINA'S GRAND STRATEGY

Grand strategy encompasses a nation's overarching plan for utilizing its military, economic, and diplomatic resources to achieve long-term objectives in international relations. In foreign policy discourse, grand strategy refers to a coherent system of commitments and positions adopted by a sovereign state on critical global issues (Layton 2012). It serves as an essential framework for shaping and executing foreign policy, both in the short and long term. As an established concept in theory, grand strategy functions as a tool for achieving the foreign policy objectives of great powers. It constitutes the "intellectual framework" that structures foreign policy, providing a logic that helps states navigate a complex and perilous world. Emerging initially from the practical

need for success in wartime operations during World War II and later adapted for peacetime conditions, the concept of grand strategy was forged through the Allied efforts to coordinate diplomatic, economic, political, and military initiatives on a global scale. Operationally, grand strategy represents an integrated approach to aligning interests, threats, resources, and policies, addressing new and unusual circumstances within the international system. As a codification of the relationship between short-term and long-term goals and the principles underlying foreign policy, Hal Brands asserts that grand strategy is more inherently suited to peacetime than wartime contexts (Brands 2014).

China's grand strategies have evolved through distinct phases, reflecting its adaptation to shifting domestic and international dynamics (Cho 2011). During the Maoist era (1949–1978), China's primary focus was on internal consolidation and survival amidst external hostilities, emphasizing self-reliance, ideological positioning in the Cold War, and limited international engagement. Under Deng Xiaoping (1978–2000), the strategy shifted toward economic modernization and integration into the global economy. This period was marked by the “hide and bide” principle, where China avoided international leadership roles while prioritizing domestic development. During the Hu Jintao era (2000–2012), the concept of “peaceful rise” was promoted to alleviate fears about China's growing power. Economic diplomacy and active participation in global institutions became central to presenting China as a responsible global actor. Since 2012, under Xi Jinping, China's strategy has grown more assertive (Horesh 2020). Initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative exemplify its ambition to reshape global economic and political structures, focusing on “national rejuvenation” with increased investment in military modernization, technological advancements, and efforts to influence global governance (Cho 2011). This trajectory underscores China's pursuit of long-term objectives of economic prosperity, national unity, and global influence, reflecting a calculated balance between ambition and restraint.

Some scholars contend that several key factors significantly shape China's security policy. Among these, they highlight interactions with industrialized and transitional countries, the collapse of the traditional legal frameworks of former socialist states, and escalating tensions in the Southeast Asian region (Swaine, Daly and Greenwood 2000). For China, this involves securing national interests, maintaining territorial integrity, and fostering economic growth while navigating a complex

global landscape characterized by competition with the United States. In the Chinese context, grand strategy is deeply rooted in synthesizing historical philosophy and modern pragmatism and recognizing evolving power dynamics. Drawing from Sun Tzu and Confucian diplomacy principles, China's strategic outlook emphasizes long-term planning, adaptability, and power balancing. Under Xi Jinping's leadership, grand strategy has become synonymous with the "China Dream" (中国梦), encapsulating goals of national rejuvenation, economic modernization, and military prowess.

Some scholars argue that the most applicable concept of understanding China's GS evolution is a "hesitant hegemony" (Stekić 2023). It reflects China's cautious approach to asserting global leadership. Stekić argues that China seeks to balance its rise by avoiding direct confrontation with established powers, particularly the United States. This approach is characterized by strategic ambiguity, selective engagement in multilateral institutions, and a focus on economic statecraft rather than military dominance. Stekić posits that China's hesitancy stems from its recognition of the risks of overextension and the potential backlash from other nations wary of its ascent (Stekić 2023).

While China's grand strategy has undergone significant transformations since the late 20th century, we can distinguish several of its key components. First is economic integration. Central to China's grand strategy is economic integration within Asia and beyond, particularly the Global South. Initiatives like the BRI aim to create interconnected trade networks that enhance China's influence while promoting regional and global development. The second is military modernization. China has invested heavily in modernizing its military capabilities, focusing on advanced technologies and expanding its presence in the South China Sea, effectively building the world's largest navy. This military assertiveness is both a deterrent against U.S. intervention and a means to project power regionally. The third is diplomatic engagement. Through multilateral forums and bilateral agreements, China seeks to cultivate relationships that promote its interests, its vision of a UN-centred transition to multipolarity, and its counterbalance to U.S. influence. The fourth is soft power. China recognizes the importance of soft power in shaping global perceptions. Cultural diplomacy, educational exchanges, and media outreach are integral components of its grand strategy to foster a favourable international environment.

Dorđević and Stekić (2022) argue that China's potential fifth Grand Strategy will increasingly prioritize domestic factors over systemic challenges, emphasizing the centrality of the security agenda and dedication to the international system in its formulation and implementation. Based on a cross-tabulated risk matrix, their analysis identifies domestic considerations as the most influential drivers of China's GS, while systemic factors such as material disparities are less significant. New competitors and overseas military dynamics are deemed critical among external challenges, whereas Black Swan events have minimal impact. Temporally, they suggest that while structural challenges are more significant in the present, intrinsic variables and domestic priorities will gain importance by 2035, reflecting a shift toward predictability and internal stability. The fifth GS is seen as potentially evolving beyond the 2003 "rejuvenation" strategy, in line with Xi Jinping's vision of reinforcing socialism with Chinese characteristics and securing global dominance. Drawing on scenarios outlined by Scobell *et al.* (2020), the authors argue that China is likely to follow an "ascendant" trajectory, balancing assertiveness with cooperative strategies, while unlikely to achieve uncontested global hegemony or face collapse.

BIDEN'S CHINA POLICY: FROM CHAMPIONING RBO TO "CONTAINMENT 2.0"

One of the key characteristics of Donald Trump's first term as U.S. president was the strategic reframing of U.S.–China relations. Dissatisfied with the slowness of Barack Obama's "turn to Asia," Trump's White House first designated China as a "strategic competitor" and reinvigorated the "China threat" narrative, denouncing Beijing-led initiatives, such as the BRI (Mitić 2023a). Under the "America first" policy, he then launched a "tariff war" with Beijing when he imposed in early 2018 a 25% tariff on steel and a 10% tariff on aluminium imports before pursuing a few months later with a 25% tariff on 818 categories of goods imported from China worth 50 billion dollars (Fetzer and Schwarz 2020). The White House increased technological competition by imposing restrictive measures against Chinese companies and urging partners to drop quests to use networks such as Huawei's 5G. Furthermore, he increased the sale of F-16 fighter jets to Taiwan and blamed Beijing for the outbreak of COVID-19. In the final document on China, the "United States Strategic Approach to the People's Republic of China," published during the 2020

electoral campaign, Trump's administration argued it was disappointed with the evolution of China's foreign policy since the two countries established diplomatic relations in 1979, and Washington's support for China's opening-up and inclusion in the globalisation system. Washington officials expected that "deepening engagement would spur fundamental economic and political opening in the PRC and lead to its emergence as a constructive and responsible global stakeholder," but the Communist Party of China "has chosen instead to exploit the free and open rules-based order and attempt to reshape the international system in its favour" (White House 2020). Moreover, Trump's administration contended that "the CCP's expanding use of economic, political, and military power to compel acquiescence from nation states harms vital American interests and undermines the sovereignty and dignity of countries and individuals around the world" (White House 2020).

While many had expected changes following the 2020 elections, Joseph Biden toughened Trump's policy. Rush Doshi, Biden's director for China at the National Security Council (NSC) argued China had "strategies of displacement," targeting U.S. power in China and Asia, before setting the scene for a worldwide effort to "displace the United States as the global leader (Doshi 2021, 4). As U.S. Secretary of State Anthony Blinker argued, "we cannot rely on Beijing to change its trajectory. So we will shape the strategic environment around Beijing to advance our vision for an open, inclusive international system" (Blinken 2022).

Indeed, Trump "produced a sharper, more rapid shift in US policy than might otherwise have occurred, and accelerated the ongoing erosion of support for the old policy of engagement," while "Republicans and Democrats were able to agree on the need for a change in US China policy and, for the first time, ambitious figures in both parties began to compete to see who could stake out the tougher stance" (Friedberg 2022).

Neorealists argued that "it's no longer debatable" that the U.S. and China "are entering their own new cold war," referring to containment policy during the rivalry with the Soviet Union (Brands and Gaddis 2021, 10). On the other hand, neoliberals contended that "this is not like Cold War containment," and that "meeting the China challenge will require a more complex strategy that leverages the alliances and rules-based system we created" (Nye 2023).

The four years of Biden's mandate (2021–2025) have witnessed elements of a "containment 2.0" policy and were upgraded with a strong

liberal internationalist discourse on the need to uphold the “rules-based world order” and a Manichean “democracy vs. autocracy” narrative.

Boosting the RBO narrative against “authoritarian states”

While the concept of a “rules-based world order” (RBO) is not entirely new, it has notably risen in prominence during the Biden administration, and it presents a critical field of battle in the global war of strategic narratives (Mitić 2024). In fact, for its supporters, the RBO is the “foundation of liberal internationalism and a resilience mechanism in preserving the post-Cold War order – epitomized by the US ‘unipolar moment’ – against non-Western ‘autocratic transgression’” (Mitić 2024). For the challengers, primarily but not exclusively China and Russia, the RBO “incorporates a set of mechanisms that selectively lean on elements of international law, interpret them freely and creatively, and align them with the interests of the political West, using double standards and the principle of ‘unique,’ *sui generis* cases to fit the needs, thus effectively undermining the UN system” (Mitić 2024).

Kachiga argues that, differing from Trump, Biden created a “new narrative” and framed US–China relations as that of “ideological competition between authoritarian regimes and democratic regimes. Biden views China as a threat to democratic rule” within a dichotomy which claims “the democratic culture is anchored in the traditional West, and the authoritarian regimes which are found in non-Western cultures, namely, in China and Russia” (Kachiga 2022, 181).

Indeed, already in December 2021, Biden summoned his “Summit for Democracy,” which reflected “a prominent view within the Biden administration that assembling a global coalition of democracies can counter China’s rise” (Pepinsky 2021). At the summit, Biden designated Moscow and Beijing as key “autocratic” challengers.

Building alliances *versus* China and Russia

At the follow-up 2023 “Summit for Democracy,” a year after the outset of Russia’s military operation in Ukraine, Beijing was designated Moscow’s main supporter in discrediting the RBO. This discourse was reproduced in various Western formats, from the European Council (European Council 2023) to NATO (Lee and Woo 2023) and the G7 (Nagy 2023). Ever since the launch of Russia’s operations in Ukraine in

February 2022, Washington and its Western allies pressured China to condemn Moscow, distance itself, and refrain from commercial dealings, particularly the exports of arms and dual-use equipment. Washington summoned Beijing to pressure Moscow and stand on the side of Kiev and NATO.

However, this approach was already in place before the 2022 hostilities. In fact, in the days following the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021, Biden first set in motion the “U.S.–Ukraine Charter on Strategic Partnership” (U.S. Department of State 2021), before forming in mid-September the AUKUS (Australia, UK, US), a strategic partnership which objective is to contain the rise of Beijing’s influence in the Pacific. It was clear by then that Biden would indeed pursue a policy of reinvigorating U.S.–led military alliances, not just in the Euro-Atlantic (NATO) but also in Asia-Pacific. In Europe, the U.S. amplified its presence and NATO’s new role by admitting two new members of the Alliance, Finland and Sweden. In Asia-Pacific, Washington fostered China-containment partnerships akin to the “island chain strategy” that John Foster Dulles had put in place during the era of the Korean war: increase of mobility for U.S. Marines in Okinawa; construction of an airfield in Mageshima; the opening of U.S. Marines base in Guam; agreement with the Philippines on the use of four bases; agreement on joint exercises and deployment of aircraft carriers with Seoul, including a B-52 bomber capable of deploying a nuclear weapon; trilateral US–Japan–South Korea summit at Camp David; operationalization of AUKUS (Australia, UK, U.S.); reinvigoration of QUAD (Japan, Australia, India, US); formation of “the Squad” (Australia, Japan, Philippines, U.S.); and providing 10 billion US dollars in military-purpose grants for Taiwan over five years (Mitić 2023b; Stošić 2024). Karlin argues that, taken together, “these campaigns demonstrate a modernized approach to collaborating with allies and partners in the service of deterrence,” and Washington, with its military, “creates several potential pathways to preclude Chinese efforts to overturn the status quo, increases the complexity of those contingencies, and induces uncertainty about which may be the most relevant” (Karlin 2024).

Securitization of globalization and weaponization of the global value chain

Under Biden, the U.S. updated Trump's tariff war and promoted an excessive securitization of globalization and the weaponization of the supply chain, leading to de-globalization through protectionist concepts such as "de-coupling"/"de-risking" and "friendly-shore outsourcing," which means the transfer of supply chains to allied countries.

Washington has pursued such policy both bilaterally and multilaterally. It argued against China's "intrusive" investment in technology and Western critical infrastructure. In 2022, Biden banned American sales to China's producers of chips before establishing 2023 the "Chip 4" alliance with Taiwan, Japan, and South Korea to undermine Beijing's role in semiconductor supply (Kyodo News 2023).

In 2022, Washington launched IPEF (Indo-Pacific Economic Framework), with the participation of 13 other countries, with the aim of boosting U.S. economic presence in the region (Manak 2022). Chinese media slammed it and labelled it "economic NATO" (Banerjee 2022).

Finally, in competition with the BRI, Biden's administration worked on alternatives. Under Trump, the U.S. created the DFC (Development Finance Corporation), a bank established by Congress with the mission of "countering China," "reducing dependence on China in critical supply chains," and providing countries "a robust alternative to state-directed investments by authoritarian governments and United States strategic competitors" (Pike and Lu 2024).

During the Biden administration, the initiative was integrated in the G7 Partnership for Global Investment and Infrastructure (PGII), with the aim to "compete" and "combat" the BRI (Lemire and Mathiesen 2022). The European Union also integrated its BRI rival version – the "Global Gateway" – into the PGII (Borrell 2022). The strategic narrative of the PGII is an alleged "superiority of values" against the BRI – its projects being described as "environmentally-sound," "labour-responsible," "value-based," "transparent," and "democratic."

Near the end of his mandate, in December 2024, Biden visited the Lobito port on the Angolan coast, the starting point of the U.S. flagship railway development project in Africa. The project, financed by the DFC, aims to connect Angola's port to Zambia and, ultimately, the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean. However, it is mainly devoted to fighting a "global reputational battle with China" and the BRI (Pike and Lu 2024).

ADAPTATION OF CHINA'S GRAND STRATEGY

Beijing faced the Biden administration in a challenging environment during the COVID-19 pandemic, negatively affecting both global supply chains and China's internal consumption. Furthermore, the geopolitical upheaval from 2021 on, following the US focus on Ukraine and sanctions against its strategic partner Russia and the building of military power in Asia-Pacific, diverted China's attention and put it in an overall defensive posture. Thus, Beijing had to adapt its grand strategy to the changes.

“True multilateralism” vs. RBO

Sensing the arrival of the prominence of the concept of RBO in Western, particularly U.S. foreign policy discourse, President Xi Jinping put forward in April 2021, at the Boao Forum for Asia Annual Conference, the concept of “true multilateralism.” “True multilateralism” is contrasted to “pseudo-multilateralism,” used by a group of states to “protect their self-serving agendas, significantly diminishing the effectiveness of international multilateral institutions’ governance” (China Institute of International Studies 2024, 3). The first feature of “pseudo-multilateralism” is its reliance on the RBO: “under the pretext of a ‘rules-based international order,’ the authority of the United Nations has been compromised by the imposition of exclusive ‘small-circle states’ within the international community, disregarding fairness and justice” and imposing “small-circle rules” which “only safeguard the interests of the ‘small circles’ and even target and undermine the interests of others” (14). This practice involves “selectively adhering to or dismissing the foundational norms of international relations, established by the purposes and principles of the United Nations Charter” (15). Other features of “pseudo-multilateralism” include the promotion of “universal values” in neglect of civilizational diversity, a Cold War zero-sum mindset over “indivisible security,” “small group collective action” featuring unilateral sanctions, ignoring multilateral commitments to global governance and applying “double standards in all areas of international relations,” effectively “undermining the international system with the United Nations at its core” (15–17). In contrast, “true multilateralism focuses on the principles of the UN Charter as a foundational guideline,” on extensive consultation, joint contribution, shared benefits and adapting to changes, particularly the rise of the Global South, global development

and preventive diplomacy (44–46). On the other side, a research group at the U.S. Army War College argued that “true multilateralism” is part of China’s great strategy, which aims to “develop and shape a China-led alternative to the US-led rules-based international order by 2035 through a ‘Covert Hegemonic Ambition’ (CHA) strategy” (Flury et al. 2024, 3). The team argues that the PRC has not formally articulated it but that “this grand strategy highly likely centers on aligning global governance with ‘Xiism,’ a combination of China’s core national interests and Chairman Xi’s ideological orientation,” which must adhere to Xi’s vision of “community of common destiny” and using hybrid tactics of economic, political and legal warfare, favourable energy and tech standards creation, cyber warfare and information/cultural influence operations (Flury *et al.* 2024, 3).

Boosting old, introducing new global initiatives

Despite Washington’s pressure points and the overall context of the COVID-19 pandemic, China opted for an offensive shaping strategy by reinvigorating the BRI and launching new initiatives.

During the Biden administration, the Belt and Road Initiative celebrated its 10th anniversary with results that impressed even some of its fiercest critics. The Economist argued that “in many ways the BRI has lived up to the hype” as “more than 150 countries, accounting for almost 75% of the world’s population and more than half of its GDP, have signed on to the scheme” (The Economist 2023). Through 3,000 projects, the BRI helped increase the GDP share of developing and emerging countries by 3.6% (Embassy of the PR of China in Grenada 2023). Despite the conflict in Ukraine, the China-Europe Railway Express, passing through the Russian Federation before ending up in the EU, showed a dramatic increase in the transport of goods, with an increase of 27% year-on-year in the first seven months of 2023 (Blair 2023). The route, launched in 2017, became an essential BRI transit route and an alternative to the dependence on transport through the Strait of Malacca. Furthermore, the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which connects China’s Western region of Kashgar to the Arabian Sea port of Gwadar, in southwestern Pakistan, provided access to the Strait of Hormuz and the daily transport of between 20 and 30% of world’s total oil consumption (Strauss Center for International Security and Law 2023). The BRI-related projects in Europe also progressed. The Athens–Piraeus

port, operated by Chinese COSCO, turned into a leading European hub, increasing capacity four-fold since the acquisition (Xinhua 2023a). Further north, on the pan-European Corridor X linking Piraeus and the Mediterranean to Central Europe, the high-speed railway connecting Belgrade and Budapest progressed, with the Serbian leg completed in 2024 and the Hungarian segment scheduled for 2026. In South America, President Xi inaugurated a \$1.3 billion deep-water port in Peru's Chancay during the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in Lima, thus boosting BRI cooperation and connectivity by reducing the duration of maritime transport across the Pacific (Baptista, Aquino and Elliot 2024). The BRI also helped China implement its "mask and vaccine diplomacy" during the COVID-19 pandemic and launched the "Initiative for Belt and Road Partnership on COVID-19 Vaccines Cooperation" with 28 countries (Liangtao, Huang and Jin 2022).

Two other older multilateral initiatives – the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and BRICS – took fundamental steps forward in expanding membership. For China, the SCO is a multilateral mechanism that helps shape a Eurasian security space without U.S. meddling. It performed a balancing act in 2023 when it allowed Iran to enter the SCO together with awarding a "dialogue partner" status to Saudi Arabia. While Beijing intensified its military cooperation with Saudi Arabia, it participated in joint naval exercises with Iran and Russia in the Gulf of Oman.

At the 2023 Johannesburg summit, BRICS decided to enlarge and allowed full membership to countries that are important BRI actors and China's bilateral partners – from Ethiopia, United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt to Iran and, from 2025 on, Indonesia, which became the first Southeast Asian member of the organization, an important impetus for Beijing (Strangio 2025).

In addition, President Xi presented three new Chinese initiatives in the 2021–2023 period: the Global Development Initiative (GDI), the Global Security Initiative (GSI), and the Global Civilisation Initiative (GCI). The GDI was launched in 2021 to recover the lost time from the slow achievement of the United Nations' 17 SDGs, focused on tackling uneven and inadequate development. Beijing received support from more than 100 countries in a Group of Friends of the Initiative and completed over 200 projects in the Global South in just two years, and announced it would contribute 10 billion dollars to the GDI implementation fund (CGTN 2023).

Xi Jinping announced the GSI in the aftermath of the start of Russia's operation in Ukraine by describing the timing as the moment in which: "changes of the world, of our times and of history are unfolding in ways like never before" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PR of China 2022). The GSI served as a basis for China's proposal for 2023 for the resolution of the conflict in Ukraine, focusing on indivisible security, clear commitment to the UN Charter, opposition to double standards regarding territorial integrity, and unilateral sanctions outside of the UN system. In 2024, Brazil joined hands with China to set up the "Friends for Peace" group at the UN, aimed at de-escalating the conflict in Ukraine (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PR of China 2024a). In the Middle East, another conflict zone that erupted during the Biden administration, China made two important inroads based on the GSI. In 2023, it helped re-establish diplomatic relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia (Global Times 2023). In 2024 it mediated an agreement between opposing Palestinian factions (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PR of China 2024b). Furthermore, the GSI helped boost cooperation in tackling terrorist threats from the "Islamist Movement of Eastern Turkistan" in the Afghan province of Badakhshan, endangering the border with China's Xinjiang, as well as the "Liberation Army of Baluchistan," disrupting transport to the China-CPEC port of Gwadar (Mitić 2022).

Finally, in 2023, Xi announced the GCI (Global Civilization Initiative) with the aim of promoting respect for the right of the world's nations to have their own development paths, as opposed to Western-imposed "universal" principles of human rights, democracy, and development (Xinhua 2023b). By promoting these initiatives, China also aimed to answer to the creation of artificial barriers to global trade, to decoupling and de-risking strategies pursued by the West, whose protectionism Beijing sees as both a blow to globalized free trade and to the development of the Global South which it increasingly sees as an important market in the future. This was reflected at the Third Plenary of the 20th Congress of the CPC in 2024 (Central Committee of the CPC, 2024).

Balancing "anti-China" economic and military alliances

China's grand strategy during the Biden administration reflects a multidimensional approach characterized by geopolitical assertiveness, economic resilience, and military modernization. Each is intricately

tied to China's global ambitions and domestic priorities and responses to global and regional challenges.

Economically, Beijing has accelerated efforts toward self-sufficiency in critical technologies and adopted the "dual circulation" strategy to balance domestic growth and consumption with global economic integration and export-oriented growth. One of the most evident manifestations of this adaptive strategy has been China's approach to the ongoing trade war initiated during the Trump administration and exacerbated under Biden. Beijing has pursued a dual approach: safeguarding its economic stability while diversifying trade partnerships to reduce dependence on the U.S. market. This has involved deepening ties with nations participating in the BRI, fostering economic integration through mechanisms like the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), and accelerating its push for technological self-sufficiency. By prioritizing sectors such as semiconductors, artificial intelligence, and renewable energy, China aims to insulate itself from the adverse effects of U.S.-led decoupling efforts and export controls. China has sought to mitigate the impact of U.S. sanctions and diplomatic pressure by strengthening ties with emerging economies and diversifying its energy and resource imports. For example, partnerships with countries in Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America have become integral to Beijing's long-term strategy of reducing vulnerability to U.S.-led initiatives. Moreover, the Biden administration's focus on human rights and democracy promotion has led to heightened scrutiny of China's domestic policies in Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. Beijing's response has been twofold: defending its policies through assertive diplomacy and simultaneously seeking to reshape global narratives through media, think tanks, and international forums. This underscores China's broader strategy of countering U.S. influence by promoting alternative governance models and emphasizing the principle of non-interference in domestic affairs.

Geopolitically, China has pursued a dual strategy of asserting sovereignty claims, particularly in the South China Sea, while deepening ties with developing nations through the BRI and other global initiatives. Biden administration's emphasis on strengthening partnerships, particularly in the Asia-Pacific, has prompted a recalibration of China's diplomatic engagements and security partnerships. By promoting the concept of a "Community of Shared Future for Mankind," leveraging platforms such as the SCO, and proposing concepts of indivisible security under the GSI, China seeks to project itself as a stabilizing force in contrast to what

it frames as the divisive policies of the U.S. The renaming of the Asia-Pacific region to the “Indo-Pacific” underlines the U.S.’s strategic shift towards addressing the rising influence of India and counterbalancing China. Beijing, however, has responded by reinforcing its presence in critical regions such as the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean. This includes militarising artificial islands, expanding naval patrols, and increasing joint military exercises with allies like Russia.

These actions reflect China’s readiness to assert its sovereignty claims while countering the U.S.’ and its allies’ perceived encirclement efforts. Adaptation has also been a hallmark of China’s approach to internal and external challenges posed by the Biden administration’s policies.

China’s military modernization has been another critical component of its readiness to confront U.S. challenges. The People’s Liberation Army (PLA) has prioritized asymmetric capabilities designed to deter U.S. intervention in potential flashpoints such as Taiwan. Investments in space and cyber warfare, hypersonic missile development, and an expanded naval presence highlight Beijing’s commitment to achieving strategic parity with Washington. Joint military exercises and expanded deployments in the Indian Ocean and Africa further signal China’s ambition to project power on a global scale.

After the beginning of the Russian military operation in Ukraine, and in a wider economic, political, and security context, China recalibrated its statecraft. In response to what it viewed as a provocative visit to Taiwan by Nancy Pelosi, the Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, China performed massive military drills in the Taiwan Strait and launched for the first time ballistic missiles over Taipei. Similarly, when Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen traveled to the U.S. in April 2023, Beijing responded by simulating sealing off Taiwan.

With the focus on testing land-strike and sea-assault capabilities, the drills showed Beijing’s readiness to react militarily in case of Taipei’s unilateral independence moves. Although smaller in scale, similar exercises were carried out in April 2023 and simulated sealing off Taiwan in response to President Tsai Ing-wen’s trip to the U.S. In addition, Beijing has also broadened its aerial incursions into Taiwan’s Air Defence Identification Zone.

Despite pressures in the neighborhood, the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) expanded its operation scope, particularly after signing a security agreement with the Solomon Islands, extending its reach in the South Pacific (Zongyuan 2022). Furthermore, the PLAN

participated in joint drills with fellow BRICS members (South Africa and Russia in the Indian Ocean in February 2023; Iran and Russia in the Gulf of Oman in March 2023, Russia in the Sea of Japan in September 2024).

CONCLUSION: READYING FOR TRUMP 2.0

The evolution of China's grand strategy during the Biden administration reflects a complex interplay of defensive posturing and proactive engagement. Confronted with heightened U.S. competition and shifting global dynamics, Beijing has adapted its geopolitical, economic, and military strategies to secure its interests and assert its role as a pivotal global actor. China has demonstrated resilience and strategic foresight by prioritizing technological self-sufficiency, expanding the BRI, BRICS, and the SCO, introducing the GDI, the GSI, and the GDI, and modernizing the PLA.

Throughout 2024, during the U.S. presidential campaign, one of the key questions for IR scholars, and the broader public opinion indeed, has been the issue of the effects of a possible return of Donald Trump to the White House and of what it would mean for the future of U.S.-China relations and the transition of global order. Trump announced he would introduce new tariffs, continue expanding barriers to China's access to U.S. technology, and continue a multidimensional competition and rivalry. Trump's choice for national security adviser, Michael Waltz, argued, "We're in a global arms race with an adversary that, unlike any in American history, has the economic and the military capability to truly supplant and replace us" (Klare 2024). Klare argues that "Trump will be pulled toward both increased militancy and combativeness and a more pragmatic, transactional approach" but that "he will have to choose between them – and his decisions will have a profound impact on this country, China, and everyone living on this planet" (Klare 2024).

Conversely, China has sent a clear message during the campaign: "Whoever sits in the White House, we are ready." This calming message is intended to show self-confidence in Beijing's adaptation and preparedness to absorb shocks and its lack of nervousness. Indeed, it aimed to show confidence in its grand strategy. The discourse was pursued after Trump's victory in November 2024.

Prominent Chinese scholar Yan Xuetong, the proponent of "moral realism" and transition from Deng Xiaoping's policy of "hide capabilities and bide time" into Xi's policy of "striving for achievement," admitted

that “the rocky relationship between the two countries is set to get rockier” (Yan 2024). However, he argued that China’s leaders “do not look at Trump with fear,” as they learned a lot from Trump 1.0: “his propensity for economic protectionism will lead to further disputes and rising tensions, but Beijing believes that it can navigate such confrontations,” while “Trump’s dubious commitment to U.S. allies will encourage other countries to hedge their bets, building ties with Beijing to offset the unpredictability of Washington” (Yan 2024).

One of these spheres might be the issue of clean energy and the fight against climate change. As Trump sets to return to fossil fuels, his domestic critics argue that China “will likely benefit the most” and “may take advantage of America’s inconsistency to become even more dominant in the global renewable energy marketplace” – where it already produces 80% of the world’s solar panels and controls 60% of the world’s wind turbine production capacity – while European partners might distance from Washington (Benson 2025).

On the other side, Beijing has shown its commitment to stand by its strategic partners throughout Biden’s presidency despite turbulence and threats. The Russian Federation is a clear example, with Beijing and Moscow expanding the “no-limit” strategic partnership in all fields, despite Western sanctions and calls on China to distance itself: BRICS and SCO have expanded, meetings between Xi and Russian President Vladimir Putin proceeded regularly, military drills have remained at pre-2022 levels, while trade has been substantially increased. In 2023, China–Russia trade reached an all-time high of 240 billion dollars, a considerable increase from 147 billion dollars in 2021 (Fong and Merrow 2024). This approach aligns with Yan Xuetong’s moral realism, which argues that Beijing should reward those who “want to have a constructive role in China’s rise” (Yan 2014).

Such consistency sets an immediate stumbling block to any potential U.S. strategy to create wedges between Moscow and Beijing. It also shows Beijing’s confidence in its global narrative on the future of “true multilateralism,” a UN-centred transition towards multipolarity, and indeed, the coherence and agility of its grand strategy.

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РЕКАЛИБРАЦИЈА ВЕЛИКЕ СТРАТЕГИЈЕ КИНЕ ТОКОМ АДМИНИСТРАЦИЈЕ ЏОЗЕФА БАЈДЕНА***

Резиме

У светлу континуираног раста дипломатске, технолошке, војне, економске и нормативне моћи Кине, у контексту транзиције ка мултиполарном поретку, Вашингтон је проширио домен конкуренције и ривалства са Пекингом током администрације Џозефа Бајдена. Уз „царинске ратове” Доналда Трампа, Бајденова политика укључила је елементе стратегије „обуздавања 2.0”, надограђене снажним либерално-интернационалистичким дискурсом о неопходности очувања „поретка заснованог на правилима” (*Rules-based Order* – RBO), као и манихејским наративом о супротстављеним парадигмама „демократије и аутократије”. Овакав приступ довео је до интензивирања RBO наратива у односу на „ауторитарне државе”, изградње савеза против Руске Федерације и Кине, као и до успостављања нових формата секуритизације глобализације и инструментализације глобалних вредносних ланаца у геополитичке сврхе. Суочена са сложеним геополитичким окружењем, Кина је морала да прилагоди своју велику стратегију. Као одговор на RBO, Пекинг је промовисао концепт „истинског мултилатерализма”. Суочен са порастом броја нових „мини-савеза” у Азијско-пацифичком региону, Пекинг је ојачао своје војне капацитете. Изван региона,

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Кина је наставила са ширењем постојећих (Иницијатива Појас и пут, Шангајска организација за сарадњу, БРИКС) и успостављањем нових мултилатералних иницијатива (Глобална иницијатива за развој, Глобална безбедносна иницијатива, Глобална иницијатива за развој). Кина је показала отпорност и стратешку далековидост, док су флексибилност и кохерентност њене еволуирајуће велике стратегије омогућили Пекингу да „дочека” повратак Доналда Трампа у Белу кућу са спремношћу и самопоуздањем, упркос „неизвесном путу пред собом”.

Кључне речи: Кина, велика стратегија, САД, Бајден, Трамп, спољна политика, међународна политика

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