



## Ukraine and Taiwan on the Biden-Xi Chessboard

By Alicia Garcia Herrero

Since the start of the Ukraine war, the tectonic movements in global geopolitics that former US president Donald Trump initiated with his economic crusade against China have acquired a dizzying speed. For one thing, his successor President Joe Biden has managed to bring together nations in the developed world to impose strong sanctions on Russia after its invasion of Ukraine, including by countries far from the conflict. This is the case with Japan but also Australia, South Korea, Taiwan and, to a lesser extent, Singapore. At the same time, China has not remained neutral in the face of the conflict but has deepened its anti-American rhetoric by coming perilously close to Russia's position, though without endorsing the narrative of support for non-compliance with sanctions imposed by the developed world. Thus the growing differences between the Western narrative and that of China, let alone Russia, are clear signs that after the invasion of Ukraine, the world is more like a chessboard than ever, where Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping are playing a major game in pursuit of global hegemony.

Viewed from Europe, the war in Ukraine and the consequences for the old continent are key to this game, but a more global observation of the situation should lead us to a very different conclusion, which Europe cannot ignore.

Indeed, Biden has given clear signals that his strategy in this game is not intended to focus on Europe in the medium term, but on Asia. The deal that the European Council has just reached by accepting Ukraine's candidacy to join the European Union surely suits the US wish to refocus its foreign, and security, policy on Asia and leave Ukraine to the EU.

There have been two clear recent examples of Asia's importance to US foreign policy. The first was Biden's White House summit in May with leaders of some members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. The summit, which aimed to bring ASEAN countries' so-far neutral positions on the conflict in Ukraine closer together, ended with more sorrow than glory, since none of them, with the exception of Singapore, moved a notch from their neutral positions, no doubt under pressure from China, their largest trading partner and major financier and implementer of major infrastructure projects in the region.

Far from giving up, Biden embarked soon after on his first official trip to Asia, focusing on two of America's main allies in the region, South Korea and Japan. Given the limited success of the ASEAN summit, expectations for Biden's trip were low, a perception that changed suddenly with the support of 12 Asian countries for Biden's proposal to create an Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF). While there was little detail on what this deal actually entailed and what economic benefits its members might enjoy, the almost unconditional support of a large number of Asian countries is an important indication of the interest in finding a counterweight to China's economic dominance in the region.

Beyond the economic weight of the Asian region for the US, the Biden administration's bid for the IPEF has an exceptional protagonist that hasn't even been invited: Taiwan. Managing to maintain the status quo when it comes to Taiwan, given China's goal of reunification, is not only key for the US but also for its allies in the Asia-Pacific region, from Japan to Australia to Singapore. The reasons are economic – given Taiwan's dominance in advanced semiconductor production – and security. The US could easily lose control of the Pacific if China gets its way with Taiwan.

In any case, the fact that the Biden administration has not invited Taiwan to the IPEF should not be equated with irrelevance, but rather with flexibility and caution on the part of the US, since it has preferred to deepen its bilateral economic relations with Taiwan, rather than regionalize them within the IPEF. In short, Biden's trip to Asia was an important sign of the region's strategic importance to the US, despite the apparent shift toward Europe in response to the Ukraine war. Second, the launch of the IPEF also makes clear that Asia is not only relevant within US security policy but also in the economic order.

Indeed, Biden could have been content during his trip to Asia to participate in the summit of the new security group created around the Indo-Pacific concept, the Quad, but he was not. Biden's economic offer to Asia proved essential because we are in a time of blurring boundaries between economy and security given the growing strategic competition between the United States and China. While Biden is turning to Asia as a market, Xi Jinping is also changing his game strategy on the big chessboard of global hegemony. In particular, China's economic might, first as the world's factory but also as a magnet for foreign multinationals' investment, seems to be moving into second place, perhaps because the goal has already been achieved.

Indeed, China is the largest trading partner for a large number of countries, especially in Asia. The Ukraine war appears to have sent a clear message to Xi, namely that China's economic might needs to be protected by making China a major security power. America's strengthening of alliances in response to the Russian invasion, from an expanding North Atlantic Treaty Organization, to the Quad and the Indo-Pacific, has only accelerated China's response. In that sense, Xi's announcement at the Boao Forum in

April of the intention to create a Global Security Initiative (GSI) should not go unnoticed, as was made clear at the recent BRICS summit, where the security dossier gained unusual weight on the agenda. So it seems clear that Xi intends to create a counterweight to the US and its security allies.

Overall, Biden and Xi seem to be converging on their strategies for global dominance. Biden needs a cheaper way to support his security alliances. Xi, by contrast, needs to offer a security option to maintain his country's huge economic clout. The big question is who has it easier. Biden's Achilles heel is his weakness at home that greatly limits his ability to act. Xi also has an internal problem, related to a much more precarious economic situation than it might seem at first sight. Added to this is the sharp deterioration in China's image abroad, which undoubtedly hinders his call for security alliances. In short, neither Biden nor Xi has the game won, but what is clear is that they will continue to move their pieces around the world chessboard, and their queen is Asia, not Europe.

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