



## THE FOREIGN POLICY CHALLENGES FACING THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION

# ASIA

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## **THE NEW CENTER**

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On March 18, 2021, officials from the U.S. and China [participated](#) in their first in-person meeting under the Biden administration during a summit in Anchorage, Alaska. Despite growing tensions between the two powers, the event was intended to be a cordial photo-op. Instead, it turned into a diplomatic controversy. Following remarks from Secretary of State Antony Blinken and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, the Director of China's Central Foreign Affairs Commission Office Yang Jiechi warned the United States against interfering in China's internal affairs and attempting to spread 'American-style' democracy abroad.

The tension at the U.S.-China Summit in Anchorage is emblematic of the great power competition between the U.S. and China on the world stage. Seeking greater influence and leverage, China is chipping away at the post-World War II economic and geopolitical order built by the U.S. and its allies. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Asia, a continent currently riddled with simmering territorial conflicts, maritime disputes, and deadly military coups.

Conflicts in Asia are complex and have distinct historical narratives, but as with the Cold War conflict between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, what happens within Asian countries will be shaped by the broader competition between China and the U.S. Thus, the stakes—and chances of escalation—have never been higher. In this installment of our foreign policy primer series, we take a look at the challenges and flashpoints in Asia that President Biden can expect to face early on in his administration.





## URGENT PRIORITY

### TAIWAN

America's relationship with Taiwan is ambiguous. To keep the peace with China—which claims Taiwan as part of “one China”—the U.S. does not have formal diplomatic relations with Taipei. The U.S. has, at the same time, pledged to protect Taiwan (the Republic of China) from any invasion from the People's Republic of China (PRC) and has over the years provided significant military aid to the island.

But this long-standing ambiguity is becoming tougher to sustain.

Between January 23-24, 2021, just days after President Biden's inauguration, China [sent](#) a total of 28 warplanes into the Taiwan Strait. In response to this show of force, the U.S. Department of State [released](#) a statement urging “Beijing to cease its military, diplomatic, and economic pressure against Taiwan” and emphasized that the U.S. commitment to Taiwan is “rock-solid.” More incursions have followed since then, with Taiwan's government [reporting](#) the most significant incursion to date (25 jets in one day) on April 12, 2021.

China's provocation in January is one in a long line of aggressions Beijing has taken against Taipei. This historic tension dates back to the end of the Chinese Civil War in 1949, when the Chinese Communist Party and the Nationalist Party formed separate governments on the mainland and on Taiwan, respectively. China does not acknowledge the sovereignty of Taiwan and believes that the island is a part of the mainland under its “one China” policy, which asserts that the PRC is the sole legal government of China. China has effectively used its military, economic, and political influence to promote this “one China” policy, and as a result, only fifteen countries officially recognize (and have diplomatic relations with) Taiwan. For these reasons, the island nation has been unable to join prominent international institutions such as the United Nations.





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According to the Congressional Research Service, the United States' [policy toward Taiwan](#) is “based on U.S.-PRC joint communiques concluded in 1972, 1978, and 1982; the TRA [Taiwan Relations Act]; and “Six Assurances” that President Ronald Reagan communicated to Taiwan in 1982.”

The United States affirms the PRC's belief that it is the sole government of China, but it has never affirmed that Taiwan falls under its jurisdiction. Instead, the United States maintains unofficial relations with Taiwan through non-government channels such as the American Institute of Taiwan and the Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office.

President Trump's confrontational China policy led the administration to cultivate one of the strongest U.S.-Taiwan relationships to date. This included unprecedented communications with and visits to Taiwan by high-level U.S. officials, \$18 billion worth of [weapons sales](#) in four years (compared to \$14 billion in sales under President Obama's eight years), and 13 freedom of navigation [operations](#) through the Taiwan strait conducted in 2020 alone.

On January 9, 2021, in the final days of the Trump presidency, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo [lifted restrictions](#) on contact between U.S. and Taiwanese officials. Trump's policy did not go unnoticed in Taiwan; according to a YouGov poll [conducted](#) in the Asia-Pacific region right before the U.S. presidential election, Taiwan was the only Asian country polled that wanted Donald Trump to win the election.

America's closer ties with Taiwan have made the Chinese government uneasy. And Taiwan's domestic politics are of even more concern to Beijing. In January 2020, Tsai Ing-wen won reelection as President of Taiwan, a position she has held since 2016. Tsai supports Taiwanese independence and made headlines in 2016 when she refused to accept the 1992 Consensus, a disputed agreement forged between representatives of Taiwan and mainland China, which states that there is “One China,” with different interpretations for what actually constitutes “China.”

In 2019, Tsai's tone on reunification hardened; following a speech by Chinese leader Xi Jinping urging Taiwan to accept the “one country, two systems” framework and embrace dialogue, Tsai [responded](#) by saying that:

As president of the Republic of China, I must solemnly emphasize that we have never accepted the “1992 Consensus.” The fundamental reason is because the Beijing authorities' definition of the “1992 Consensus” is “one China” and “one country, two systems.” The speech delivered by China's leader today has confirmed our misgivings. Here, I want to reiterate that Taiwan absolutely will not accept “one country, two systems.” The vast majority of public opinion in Taiwan is also resolutely opposed to “one country, two systems,” and this opposition is also a “Taiwan consensus.”

Public opinion is also unfavorable to China; according to a June 2020 survey [released](#) by the Taiwanese Public Opinion Foundation, 54% of Taiwanese support independence while 23.4% support the status quo and only 12.5% support unification. This is the highest level of public support for official independence ever recorded.

A new administration may foster uncertainty over the future of U.S.-Taiwan relations, but early actions from and statements by Joe Biden and his cabinet signal the continuation of a strong diplomatic and military partnership. Joe Biden [formally invited](#) Bi-Khim Hsiao, Taiwan's top U.S. representative, to his inauguration, marking the first time since 1979 that a Taiwanese "ambassador" to the U.S. attended the ceremony. And at his confirmation hearing, Secretary of State Antony Blinken [affirmed](#) the U.S. commitment to ensuring Taiwan can defend itself and went even further to say that the administration wants to see Taiwan "play a greater role around the world, including in international organizations."

While the Biden administration—and the Trump administration before it—has stepped up to meet China's growing threat to Taiwan's sovereignty, it would be remiss not to expect China to also step up against perceived threats to its territorial integrity.

## STABILITY ON THE KOREAN PENINSULA

A week before President Joe Biden's inauguration, North Korean leadership set the tone for their diplomatic relations with the new administration. During the Eighth Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK), held between January 6-12, 2021, North Korean leader Kim Jong-un [proclaimed](#) that the nation's primary foreign policy focus would be "containing and subduing the U.S." and that "[the] key to establishing [a] new relationship between the DPRK and the U.S. lies in the U.S. withdrawal of its hostile policy towards the DPRK."

For years, North Korea has aggressively developed its nuclear and missile weapons programs, and the United States and its allies have worked to thwart it. This dynamic [remains unchanged](#) from administration to administration, and each president has tried and failed to arrest Pyongyang's program. Barack Obama, for example, practiced "strategic patience" with more scaled-up sanctions towards the end of his term. Donald Trump undertook a similar "maximum pressure" campaign that [featured](#) threats of "fire and fury" from the president himself. Trump later embraced "summit diplomacy," becoming the first U.S. leader to meet a North Korean leader during the Singapore Summit in 2018, where the two parties [signed](#) a joint declaration to work towards peace and stability on the Korean peninsula.

But neither Trump's policies, nor Obama's policies, nor the policies of any preceding president have succeeded in denuclearizing the Korean peninsula. As a result, the Arms Control Association [estimates](#) that, as of June 2019, North Korea has amassed between 20 and 30 nuclear warheads and the fissile material for 30 to 60 more. Beyond that, North Korea is believed to have a variety of biological and chemical weapons capabilities.

President Joe Biden enters the White House no stranger to North Korea's strategic interests and capabilities. As a first challenge, his national security team can expect provocative shows of force as Pyongyang attempts to put itself at the forefront of the U.S. agenda. North Korea already conducted its first provocation in March 2021 when it [launched](#) two missiles into the Sea of Japan, and data from the Center for Strategic and International Studies [shows](#) that more provocations are likely to come during presidential or midterm election years.



Even if this is expected, there is always a chance that a simple missile test could go wrong or that another nation in the region (such as South Korea) might retaliate in response to a perceived threat.

Second, President Biden and his team must also pay attention to North Korean capabilities beyond nuclear and missile development. Scott A. Snyder, the Director of the Program on U.S.-Korea Policy at the Council on Foreign Relations, [writes](#) that “military development serves as leverage North Korea could use to frame future negotiations with the United States around arms control rather than denuclearization.”

And third, the United States must be mindful of how COVID-19 strained North Korea’s already frail economy and public health infrastructure, as internal pressure and unrest might compel Kim Jong-un to behave erratically abroad to distract from problems at home.



## CHALLENGES TO HONG KONG'S STATUS

Hong Kong is an administrative region of China that has been governed under a “one country, two systems” policy since it was handed over to China by the British government in 1997. Before the handoff, China and Britain negotiated terms for how China would govern the region, [outlined in](#) the Sino-British Joint Declaration of 1984. The declaration states that Hong Kong would have autonomy over its internal affairs and would retain a “capitalist system and life-style,” with China being responsible for Hong Kong’s defense and foreign policy. This system was to remain unchanged for 50 years.

In recent years, Chinese and Hong Kongese officials have proposed changes that challenge the region’s special status. One of these changes was a 2019 extradition bill [introduced](#) by the Hong Kong Legislative Council, which would have instituted previously nonexistent extradition agreements between Hong Kong and places like Taiwan, Macau, and mainland China. Many Hong Kong citizens believed that if the bill passed, it would have led to further Chinese incursion into Hong Kong’s affairs. In response, mass protests against the law began to form.

Tensions hit a breaking point in June 2020, when the Chinese government [imposed](#) a new national security law on Hong Kong. The law criminalized secession, subversion, terrorist activities, and collusion with a foreign country or with external elements to endanger national security. Amongst other provisions, it also established the “Office for Safeguarding National Security” to be run by the Central People’s government within Hong Kong. Chinese and mainland-aligned Hong Kongese officials have [taken advantage](#) of the new law by arresting dissenters, disqualifying pro-democracy candidates from running for office, and expelling legislators. In one high-profile case, Hong Kong entrepreneur and media tycoon Jimmy Lai was arrested under the new law and [sentenced](#) in April 2021 to 14 months in prison.

China’s imposition of a national security law on Hong Kong was condemned by many members of the international community. In July 2020, President Trump [signed](#) Executive Order (E.O.) 13936, which revoked Hong Kong’s policy exemptions in light of Hong Kong being “no longer sufficiently autonomous to justify differential treatment in relation to the People’s Republic of China.” The United States, as well as other countries, also [imposed sanctions](#) on a variety of Hong Kong businesses, banks, and officials (including chief executive Carrie Lam) who played a role in the implementation of the law and subsequent crackdown on demonstrators. Many countries also undertook initiatives to aid Hong Kong residents who wished to flee the deteriorating political environment. The United Kingdom, for example, [introduced](#) a new visa program in 2021 which would make 5.4 million Hong Kong residents eligible to live in the U.K. and apply for “settled status” after five years.

On May 22, 2020, When President Biden was still on the campaign trail, he [released a statement](#) in response to China’s proposed national security law, emphasizing that “we need to be clear, strong, and consistent on values when it comes to China.” And [during](#) Biden’s first call with Chinese President Xi Jinping on February 10, 2021, he “underscored his fundamental concerns” with China’s “crackdown in Hong Kong.” Beyond that, the administration has taken no concrete action in response to China’s infringement on Hong Kong’s sovereignty.



*The Tsuen Wan March against the extradition bill in Hong Kong on August 25, 2019. Source: [Studio Incendo](#)*



## WATCH LIST

### A MILITARY COUP IN MYANMAR

Myanmar (also known as Burma) has endured multi-faceted internal strife since it gained independence from Britain in 1948. One major [source of conflict](#) is the civil war between Myanmar's military (the Tatmadaw) and ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) in the state, which has been ongoing for almost 60 years. Conflict began in 1962 when General U Ne Win took power following a military coup against an elected civil government led by the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL). The civil war has gone through periods of "low-grade" conflict to intensification, and despite multiple ceasefires and peace talks, it appears there is no end in sight to what is [considered](#) the world's "longest-running civil war."

At the same time, Myanmar's government and military are facing international condemnation for actions taken against the Rohingya, a Muslim ethnic minority in Myanmar's Rakhine state. [Attacks](#) on security outposts by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) in 2017 led to an escalated response from Myanmar's military that the former U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights [called](#) "a textbook example of ethnic cleansing." According to the Council on Foreign Relations's Global Conflict Tracker, the latest Rohingya persecution has [resulted](#) in 712,700 Rohingya fleeing to Bangladesh and 128,000 Rohingya being internally displaced.

All of this is occurring as the country tries to transition to a stable democracy following the dissolution of its military junta in 2011. But the latest developments may complicate that transition.

On February 1, 2021, Myanmar's military staged a coup and took control of the government, [citing](#) the "terrible fraud in the voter list during the democratic general election," an allegation that was [rejected](#) shortly before the coup by Myanmar's official election commission. To consolidate control, the Tatmadaw has shut down internet access, instituted curfews, and taken over television broadcasts. Myanmar's deposed civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi, whose National League for Democracy party won the election, has been [under house arrest](#) for over three months.

On the day of the military coup, the Biden administration [released a statement](#) condemning the "direct assault on the country's transition to democracy and the rule of law." In the weeks that followed, the administration also announced new sanctions against military leaders, instituted export-control limitations, and [redirected](#) \$42 million in USAID funds away from the government and towards initiatives to "support and strengthen civil society."

Millions have taken to the streets in Myanmar to [protest](#) the power grab, and in turn, the military has harshly cracked down on demonstrators. Thus far, the military is [reported](#) to have killed over 700 people across Myanmar, 82 of them in just one city.



## THREATS OF CHINESE TERRITORIAL EXPANSION

As China seeks to expand its influence in the region, it is sparking new sovereignty disputes and reigniting old ones. These conflicts, maritime and territorial in nature, span a wide area that includes the South China Sea, East China Sea, and the border between China and India.

### CHINA'S BORDER DISPUTE WITH INDIA

The territorial dispute between China and India centers around two regions—Aksai Chin and Arunachal Pradesh. Aksai Chin is claimed by India as part of its Kashmir state, and China claims Arunachal Pradesh as part of Tibet. China seized Aksai Chin during the 1962 war between India and China, which [resulted in](#) a defeat for the Indian army in the area. Arunachal Pradesh, by contrast, is under Indian control. It borders southeastern Tibet and has a population of over one million people. While Tibet [gave away](#) the area to the colony of British India at the 1914 Simla Convention, China today asserts that Tibet was not truly independent at the time and had no authority to transfer de facto control of the region to India.

Since 1962, no large-scale military conflict has taken place in either area. There has been a great deal of tension and occasional skirmishes between military units, but they have never resulted in injury or death of military personnel. However, in June 2020, India initiated road construction along a disputed area of Kashmir that [resulted in](#) several casualties on both sides; the Indian media reports that its soldiers [killed](#) over 40 Chinese combatants but the veracity of these claims remains dubious. These confrontations have stoked nationalist sentiments, with Indian nationalists [demanding](#) a mass boycott of Chinese goods.

In the most recent attempt to resolve border tensions, the Chinese and Indian militaries [engaged](#) in a round of negotiations on April 10, 2021. The talks ended with no joint statement and no resolution to the ongoing conflict.





## DISPUTES IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

The South China Sea is a strategically important waterway subject to historical territorial disputes between Brunei, China, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam. At the center of the dispute are not only its waterways but also the Paracel and Spratly Islands and rocks and reefs such as Scarborough Shoal. The U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea, effective since 1994, was [intended](#) to help resolve maritime disputes by outlining the terms under which states can exercise sovereignty over their own territorial sea, the high seas, and the exclusive economic zones (EEZ) of other states. However, rapid globalization, increasing demands for national resources, and China's rise have done nothing but further escalate maritime tensions.

Compared to other nations on the South China Sea rim, China has made a disproportionately large claim—referred to as the Nine-Dash line—that eats into the EEZs of other coastal states. China has been attempting to solidify its historical claim through “island-building” and constructing airfields, ports, and military installations on islands and reefs.

Nations in the region have been pushing back against China both diplomatically and militarily. In 2016, for example, the Philippines [brought a suit](#) against China under the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in the Hague. The five-judge tribunal ultimately invalidated China's expansive claims to the waterways and ruled its island-building measures a violation of the Philippines' sovereign rights in its own EEZ. And the United States Navy frequently conducts freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) in the South China Sea to protect its interests and ensure freedom of navigation for all nations in the area.

The Biden administration [conducted](#) its first FONOP on February 5, 2021, near the Paracel Islands to challenge “the unlawful restriction on innocent passage imposed by China, Taiwan, and Vietnam and also by challenging China's claim to straight baselines enclosing the Paracel Islands.”





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## DISPUTES IN THE EAST CHINA SEA

The East China Sea is the theater for long-standing maritime and territorial disputes between China, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. [According to](#) the National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR), “territorial disputes emerge over ownership of the land features that dot the seas. Maritime disputes, on the other hand, relate to overlapping jurisdictional claims over maritime areas.” Ultimately, the two are intertwined because different land features can afford a claimant certain maritime rights as well.

Of the various disputes within the ECS, the conflict between China and Japan over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands is not only the most intense but also the greatest security threat the Biden administration will need to monitor. China and Japan each have their respective [historical claims](#) to the islands, with China claiming to have annexed them in 1403 during the Ming Dynasty and Japan claiming to have annexed them in 1895 at the end of the First Sino-Japanese War. Beyond serving to bolster historical memory, the islands also sit atop lucrative natural gas reserves and can serve as strategic security outposts.

As a result, tensions between Japan and China have at times reached critical points.

In 2010, for example, the crew of a Chinese fishing boat was [detained](#) after colliding with Japanese Coast Guard patrol boats within the disputed waters. Though the crew was eventually released, the event sparked protests in China and a boycott of Japanese goods. Two years later, Japan [nationalized](#) three of the uninhabited islands, which prompted China to send fighter jets and ships into Japanese territory.

Then, in 2013, China [established](#) an “East China Sea Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ),” which encompassed the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. In response to the Chinese announcing the ADIZ, then-President Barack Obama [announced](#) in 2014 before a state tour of Asia that “the policy of the United States is clear—the Senkaku Islands are administered by Japan and therefore fall within the scope of Article 5 of the U.S.-Japan Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security.”

In 2012, the security threat of the Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute [prompted](#) China and Japan to work towards establishing a formal dispute resolution mechanism to avoid accidental conflict, but China’s ADIZ announcement temporarily halted any diplomatic talks.

It wasn’t until June 2018, six years later, that the “hotline” was formally [launched](#).

It’s unclear how successful the hotline has been at tamping down tensions as the Japanese foreign ministry [reports](#) a “surge” in Chinese incursions within the waters of the disputed islands. But in one of his first calls as president to foreign leaders, Biden and Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga “[discussed](#) the U.S.-Japan alliance and affirmed its importance as the cornerstone of peace and prosperity in a free and open Indo-Pacific” and emphasized that the United States is committed to providing “extended deterrence to Japan.”