

Biden and Xi Struggle to Compete in Asia

What do the two superpowers have in common as they woo the region? Flawed strategies.

By **James Crabtree**, a columnist at *Foreign Policy* and the executive director of the International Institute for Strategic Studies-Asia.

Southeast Asian leaders are on their way to Washington this week to meet with U.S. President Joe Biden for a long-awaited summit. Biden's agenda for his twice-delayed meeting with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN): to stop the region's drift toward China. But the summit is taking place at a watershed moment for another reason. As the United States and China step up their global contest for influence and power, each is readying new plans to address their respective strategic blind spots. And neither plan is likely to succeed.

All too aware that the United States' economic clout in the region is declining as China's market continues to grow, Biden will use this week's special summit to talk up his forthcoming Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF). A patchwork economic plan, the IPEF tries to make up for Washington's new unwillingness to negotiate the kind of market-opening trade deals Asian leaders like—and which China remains happy to strike.

Meanwhile, Beijing is touting a new scheme of its own, similarly designed to patch a hole in its global strategy. China has been unable to push back effectively against the United States' global network of alliances and its role as a security guarantor—a role that has, if anything, grown stronger since Russia's invasion of Ukraine. That's why Beijing is now rolling out its Global Security Initiative, first floated by Chinese President Xi Jinping at the Boao Forum for Asia last month but ill-defined so far.

Take the IPEF first. First mooted last year, the idea was dreamed up by U.S. officials to fill the gaping hole left in Washington's Indo-Pacific strategy when then-U.S. President Donald Trump walked out of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) in 2017. That move is often lamented by U.S. partners in Asia, who hope the United States might return to it at some point soon. Both Biden and U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan are by all accounts set against the CPTPP, seeing such trade deals as a sure route to domestic political calamity. Hence, the IPEF: designed to suggest some kind of positive economic agenda but, in truth, a thin replacement that will do little to slow down most Asian nations' ever deeper economic integration with China.

The IPEF will be a major talking point at this week's summit, which Biden attempted to hold twice before, only for it to be delayed when too few Southeast Asian leaders could attend. Kurt Campbell, Asia coordinator for the U.S. National Security Council, recently claimed that building deeper ASEAN ties would be a major Biden priority for 2022, a belated recognition of the region as a critical battleground for Sino-U.S. competition. Yet, IPEF omens are not promising. The framework focuses on areas varying from supply chain resilience and clean energy to taxation and corruption as well as new rules for "fair and resilient" trade, such as asking partners to sign up to high labor standards. Traditionally, emerging nations such as those of ASEAN sign up to these kinds of onerous requirements because they get the sweetener of tariff cuts and market access in return. But because the administration has promised to protect

domestic workers and producers, which requires shielding them from foreign competition, **the IPEF offers no U.S. market access.** For ASEAN, it's an all-pain, no-gain economic deal.

The result is a mess, with Washington offering a deal few actually want. Advanced economies like Australia, Japan, and New Zealand might sign on, mostly because of their close geopolitical ties to the United States. Singapore may do so too. But whether crucial geopolitical swing states like Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand will do so remains in doubt—let alone smaller Pacific Ocean nations like the Solomon Islands, whose recent dealings with China have been much discussed. Either way, **the results will do little to change the basic economic balance between the United States and China.** The IPEF will ultimately leave the Biden administration reliant on the same old, unbalanced strategy, where Washington must focus on its military and security heft to prop up its regional influence.

China's problem is the opposite. It has plenty of economic influence and is growing in military power. But it lacks the broad network of alliances and partnerships that give the United States such security sway, alongside the benefits that accrue from having created much of the world's existing security architecture in the first place. Beijing will have noticed the extent to which this kind of U.S. power has been on display during Washington's relatively successful campaign to push back against Russian aggression—whether through the United Nations or U.S.-led institutions like NATO.

It was against this backdrop that Xi announced China's plans to develop its Global Security Initiative (GSI), which he argued would help to “build a balanced, effective, and sustainable security architecture” and “reject the Cold War mentality, oppose unilateralism, and say no to group politics and bloc confrontation.” Details remain vague, though this has often been true for major new Chinese initiatives. The Belt and Road Initiative, for example, began life as a vague Xi speech back in 2013 before quickly transforming through subsequent announcements into a globe-spanning infrastructure behemoth.

Why China has decided it needs such a plan is obvious. At one level, its leadership is genuinely alarmed at the direction of the global order post-Ukraine. Beijing feels it has little option but to support Moscow, given the more dominant U.S.-Chinese rivalry, particularly in Asia. Where Washington recently produced a new Indo-Pacific strategy to counter Beijing, so Beijing now feels it needs a new global strategy to counter Washington.