

The New York Times

Biden's National Security Strategy Focuses on China, Russia and Democracy at Home

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David E. Sanger

By David E. Sanger

Oct. 12, 2022

President Biden declared on Wednesday that the overwhelming challenge for the United States in the coming years would be “outcompeting China and restraining Russia” while focusing on restoring a damaged democracy at home.

In his 48-page national security strategy, which every new administration is required to issue, Mr. Biden made clear that over the long term he was more worried about China’s moves to “layer authoritarian governance with a revisionist foreign policy” than he was about a declining, battered Russia. More than six months after the invasion of Ukraine, the Russian military appears less fearsome than it did when the first drafts of the document circulated in the White House in December.

“Russia and the P.R.C. pose different challenges,” Mr. Biden wrote, using the abbreviation for the People’s Republic of China. “Russia poses an immediate threat to the free and open international system, recklessly flouting the basic laws of the international order today, as its brutal war of aggression against Ukraine has shown.”

China “is the only country with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military and technological power to advance that objective,” the president wrote.

Mr. Biden’s strategy is notable for its erasure of the distinctions between domestic and foreign policy; it argues that the source of U.S. strength will come from a reaffirmation of the nation’s democratic traditions. But it also comes as China is on the rise and seeking to rewrite the rules of commerce, surveillance and influence over other countries and Russia is seeking to redraw national boundaries. Allies and adversaries alike will examine the strategy for indications of Mr. Biden’s commitment to standing up to both opponents.

The president took some unusual positions, especially for a Democrat. He urged a speedier modernization of the military, though critics say his budget does not reflect his ambitions. And he took a dark view of the benefits of globalization, describing at length how it has fueled pandemics and disinformation and contributed to supply chain shortages.

And Mr. Biden returned to a theme he has established since his second month in office, describing a coming struggle as one of autocracies versus democracies. He said the United States must invest with allies and private industry as part of a Western effort to reduce dependence on adversaries.

The strategy document was delayed last winter, as it became clear that the Russian invasion of Ukraine was imminent and that the U.S. relationship with its European allies was about to undergo a tremendous test. The revised document celebrates a new coherence among NATO countries but also

includes warnings to Moscow that were clearly inserted to reflect a new era of containment, the word used during the Cold War to restrain the biggest challenge at the time: Soviet expansionism.

“The United States will not allow Russia, or any power, to achieve its objectives through using, or threatening to use, nuclear weapons,” the new document says. But the sentence stands alone, with no clarification of the meaning of “not allow” or discussion of the U.S. and NATO response if President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia chooses to use a tactical nuclear weapon to make up for the failures of his conventional force in Ukraine. Mr. Biden declined to go into detail about his options when pressed on CNN on Tuesday in an interview with Jake Tapper.

For every administration, the national security strategy is a combination of guidance, a signaling of intent to allies and adversaries, and, often, a self-celebratory ode to American power. President George W. Bush’s strategy was known for its establishment of a “pre-emption” doctrine that contributed to his administration’s justification for the invasion of Iraq. Mr. Obama used his to call for a move to a world without nuclear weapons, but also for an expansion of American soft power to conquer disease and global poverty.

President Donald J. Trump declared that the era of counterterrorism was being replaced by a revival of superpower competition against what he called “revisionist” powers, though he usually ignored his document’s declarations about the value of NATO and other alliances.

Mr. Biden’s strategy document delves into the workings of American democracy, absent from previous strategies. “As Americans, we must all agree that the people’s verdict, as expressed in elections, must be respected and protected,” the document says. It then discusses moves against “domestic terrorism” and says “America will not tolerate foreign interference in our elections.”

Western sanctions have hampered Russia’s ability to resupply its army, a report says.

Elon Musk says SpaceX can’t fund internet service in Ukraine ‘indefinitely.’

Ukraine demands that the Red Cross visit a notorious prison camp in Donetsk.

The opening sections of the strategy focus on domestic issues, led by the reinvigoration of key technologies and starting with the ability to produce the most advanced semiconductors.

“We have broken down the dividing line between foreign policy and domestic policy to make far-reaching investments here at home in our industrial and innovation base,” Jake Sullivan, the national security adviser, told reporters on Wednesday morning.

Mr. Biden recently traveled to Ohio to help break ground on a new Intel facility and to an IBM site in upstate New York, celebrating investments made by the federal government through the newly passed CHIPS Act. But it will be years before those plants — and others built by Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company and Samsung in the American Southwest — will be in production. Even then, they will account for a tiny fraction of the most advanced microelectronics that American industry consumes.

Mr. Sullivan said the strategy was driven chiefly by a changed landscape, one the document describes bluntly: “The post-Cold War era is definitively over.”

“We have entered a decisive decade with respect to two fundamental strategic challenges,” Mr. Sullivan told reporters on Wednesday. “The first is the competition between the major powers to shape the future of the international order,” he said, and the second to deal with transnational challenges such as “climate change, food insecurity, to communicable diseases, to terrorism, to the energy transition, to inflation.”

The past few weeks have shown how difficult some of those will be.

Mr. Biden was undercut by Saudi Arabia, which he visited over the summer, when the kingdom led a movement in OPEC last week to cut oil production after telling him it would increase it. The OPEC

move contributes to inflation, and it also aids Russia's effort to finance the war in Ukraine. Mr. Biden said on Tuesday that he would reconsider his relationship with the Saudis and make them pay a price.

Mr. Biden made clear that over the long term he was more worried about China's moves to "layer authoritarian governance with a revisionist foreign policy." Credit...Tingshu Wang/Reuters

China's cooperation on climate issues has slowed to a near halt; "strategic stability" talks with Russia on limiting nuclear arsenals have ended.

"Russia now poses an immediate and persistent threat to international peace and stability," the document says, a sharp departure from decades of strategies that discussed working to integrate Russia and the West. "This is not about a struggle between the West and Russia. It is about fundamental principles of the U.N. Charter, which Russia is a party to, particularly respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity and the prohibition against acquiring territory through war."

Mr. Putin clearly sees it differently: He claims Ukraine was always part of Russia, back to the era of the czars, and has described this moment as driven by the West's effort to contain and starve Russian power.

But what leaps from the pages of Mr. Biden's strategy, which was drafted by the National Security Council with input from around the administration, is a relentless focus on China. This was also the theme of a speech this week by Jeremy Fleming, the chief of Britain's cyber and signals intelligence agency.

Much of the military planning described in the administration's document is meant to counter China in space, cyberspace and at sea. Each of those arenas requires very different arms, software and strategies than the push to contain Russia on the ground in Europe. The document describes a more aggressive U.S. effort to enhance cybersecurity and urges work with allies and the private sector to "withstand attempts to degrade our shared technology advances" by limiting Chinese and other investment in the United States and controlling exports of key technologies to China.

Mr. Biden's strategy document rebukes President Vladimir V. Putin for a "brutal war of aggression against Ukraine" and says Russia poses a near-term threat for flouting international law. Credit...Sputnik, via Reuters

Some critics of the strategy fear that it does not move fast enough. "China's plans for Taiwan center around 2027," Kori Schake, who directs foreign and defense policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute, said in an interview. "The budget does not envision modernization at that speed."

Ms. Schake wrote in a New York Times opinion essay last month that "the ships, troop numbers, planes and missile defenses in the Pacific are a poor match for China's capability." Mr. Sullivan pushed back on that critique, maintaining that Mr. Biden's budget followed the strategic guidance that was first laid out in preliminary form in his first weeks in office.

The new national security strategy paves the way for the Pentagon to publish in the coming weeks its national defense strategy and an associated document, called the nuclear posture review, which will describe Mr. Biden's plans for the nuclear arsenal.

Mr. Sullivan said that despite Russia's recent threats, the documents would be "a step forward toward the reduction of the role of nuclear weapons in American strategy."

"We are not seeking to have competition tip over into confrontation or a new Cold War," he insisted. But it is that last phrase that Chinese officials have often used to describe U.S. strategy.

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A version of this article appears in print on Oct. 13, 2022, Section A, Page 1 of the New York edition with the headline: In Long View, Biden Strategy Aims at China. [Order Reprints](#) | [Today's Paper](#) | [Subscribe](#)