

The Liberal Hawks and the China Strategy of the Biden Administration

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Abstract: Since the Biden administration came to power, the liberal hawks who uphold the liberal internationalist strategy have regained a significant influence on foreign affairs and national security, prioritized the repair of U.S. hegemony, and maintained strategic competition with China initiated by the Trump administration. When compared with the paradigm of competition of the Trump administration, the liberal hawks of the Biden administration have improved the strategic logic of competition with China and refined the relevant policy layout to render it compatible with the overall agenda of the Democratic Party. Enhancing strategic competition with China under the leadership of the liberal hawks has not been in the interests of China, the United States (U.S.), or the entire world. The healthy and stable development of China–U.S. relations requires additional rational and pragmatic policies from the side of the U.S.

Keywords: liberal hawks, Biden administration, China–U.S. relations, strategic competition

Since taking office in January 2021, the Biden administration has promoted reforms and adjustments in foreign affairs and security and employed a group of liberal strategic elites with professional backgrounds, whose strategic thinking and policy orientation reflect establishment-oriented strategies and policies. Simultaneously, the Biden administration, which is very different from the Trump administration in terms of foreign policy, has inherited and even deepened the framework of the Trump administration with regard to the China strategy. The expectation about the reduction of the intensity of competition with China by the Biden administration has not come to fruition.

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Thus, the question emerges: Why did the Biden administration opt to further strategic competition with China? In addition to structural factors, such as changes in the power balance between China and the U.S., attention is also required on the liberal hawks in the diplomatic and security teams of the Biden administration. To address this concern, this study analyzes the initiatives of the liberal hawks under the Biden administration and the strategic competition of the U.S. with China under Biden's leadership.

I

The Democrats and Republicans in the U.S. present different foreign policy propositions, and the policy propositions of the same party across historical periods also exhibit varying characteristics. A conventional impression is that Republicans and the broader conservatives tend to appear tougher than Democrats and the broader liberals in terms of foreign policy and national security. In particular, the radical right-wing Republicans, represented by Donald Trump, made a high-profile exhibition of strength against China in recent years, which has intensified this impression. However, one can infer that this impression is not absolute when examining the history of American foreign policy; the Democratic Party does not always pursue soft diplomacy and even upholds a profoundly hawkish tradition. For a long time, sections of the Democratic Party of the U.S. have firmly believed in the indispensability of liberal hegemony and do not exclude the use of foreign intervention to advance the strategic interests of the country. These political elites, known as the liberal hawks, have profoundly shaped foreign policy in the U.S. since the 20th century.

The foreign policy thinking of the liberal hawks can be traced back to the strategy of liberal internationalism, which was established by Democratic politicians, such as Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt, in the first half of the 20th century. Its core proposition was that the U.S. needs to actively participate in global affairs and play a key role. Since the end of World War II, the liberal hawks profoundly influenced the foreign policies of successive Democratic administrations.

On the one hand, in foreign policy practices, such as the Cold War and global anti-terrorism, a few policy traditions of the liberal hawks have gradually

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solidified into the foreign policies of the Democratic Party establishment. From Harry Truman initiating the Iron Curtain of the Cold War and forming military alliances in Europe and Asia to the “Bay of Pigs Invasion” by John F. Kennedy and his support for the Vietnam War, the “Human Rights Diplomacy” by Jimmy Carter, and countering the global expansion of the erstwhile USSR—the existence of the liberal hawks does not make Democrats weak on foreign policy, the label frequently given by many Republicans. In essence, the liberal hawks are the founders and defenders of American liberal hegemony. For a long time, the liberal hawks have emphasized ideological confrontation in foreign policy and have preferred to divide international camps through the system and values of freedom and democracy. They advocate the construction of international systems and seek the maintenance and consolidation of the hegemony of the U.S. by establishing and leading international political and economic mechanisms and norms. Moreover, they regard overseas intervention as an important method for safeguarding their strategic interests. They frequently interfere in the affairs of other countries in the name of concerns for human rights.

On the other hand, after years of intergenerational inheritance and the revolving door effect, the liberal hawks have formed an elite network across the government, think tanks, universities, and the private sector. Thus, they have formed continuous control over the diplomatic and national security system across the U.S.. For example, Paul Nitze, then-chief of staff of the State Department, created a grand strategy for the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in the early days of the Cold War. Moreover, then-national security advisor Anthony Lake and Secretary of State Madeleine Albright led the formulation of a strategy called “Engagement and Enlargement” after the Cold War. Hilary Clinton boasted about the strategy of “Rebalance” in the Asia-Pacific region during the Obama administration. Therefore, the liberal hawks have not only realized the succession of core policy concepts but have also maintained their influence after leaving government by establishing think tanks, such as the Center for New America Security, and research institutions in universities, such as the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at Harvard University. Moreover, they have established consulting firms, such as WestExec Advisors, a strategic advisory firm. The liberal hawks have also cultivated numerous talents for later use. After decades, they have carved globalism and hegemonism

into the fabric of foreign policy in the U.S. and, to a certain extent, have even become representatives of establishment-oriented diplomacy.

In recent years, however, the surge of right-wing populism, isolationism, and the anti-establishment campaign in the U.S. has caused the departure of many of the liberal hawks, who serve as elites of the national security community. A few of them have lost some ground in the foreign policymaking circle. The liberal hawks, previously marginalized under the Trump administration, have regained power during the Biden administration and demonstrated a few novel features that differ from those of the past.

First, the liberal hawks of the Biden administration are mainly officials of establishment elites of the former Obama administration, and their position of power is consolidated in an unprecedented manner. The rise and fall of the liberal hawks after the Cold War can be traced back to the Bush administration. After George W. Bush took office in the early 21st century, he appointed a group of right-wing strategists, who advocated hard power diplomacy and regime change. They changed the foreign policy of the Clinton administration, which paid more attention to multilateral economic and trade interests instead of unilateral military expeditions. Moreover, they considered global counter-terrorism the core task of national security, which made foreign policy increasingly militarized. At the time, although the liberal hawks of the Democratic Party disagreed with this policy orientation, making a difference was difficult for them because they were absent from the political foreground. In 2009, Barack Obama, a Democrat, came to power, and many of the liberal hawks were re-appointed. However, wanting to make diplomatic changes at the time, Barack Obama did not entirely rely on the liberal hawks, who were deeply rooted in the national security sector of foreign policy. On the contrary, he appointed campaign confidants, who were relatively inexperienced in policy work but better understood his governing philosophy as senior staff, such as former Deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes. Once again, these people were more influential in decision-making than the liberal hawks were.

At the end of the Obama administration in 2016, the Democratic Party nominated former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton as its presidential candidate, and the liberal hawks saw an opportunity to seize power. Hillary Clinton is the core figure of the liberal hawks during the Obama administration. She has

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supported many Democratic diplomatic elites and has been considered more capable than Donald Trump of maintaining global hegemony in the U.S. However, the failure of the election of Hillary Clinton prevented the liberal hawks from taking power as they had originally expected. In 2021, with Joe Biden, a Democrat, taking office, the liberal hawks finally fully grasped the core power of foreign policy.

On the one hand, the liberal hawks have gained positions during the Biden administration that were higher than their previous ones. For instance, Secretary of State Anthony Blinken was the Deputy Secretary of State under the Obama administration. Jake Sullivan, the Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, was the national security advisor to the vice president during the Obama Administration. Avril Haines, Director of National Intelligence, was the Deputy Director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) during the Obama administration.

On the other hand, a new generation of liberal-hawk strategists has moved to key positions. Many young and middle-aged strategic elites who are Democrats have joined the Biden administration from think tanks. For instance, Ely Ratner, the former Executive Vice President at the Center for a New American Security, is currently the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs. Rush Doshi, who was the founding director of the Brookings China Strategy Initiative, serves as the senior China Director at the National Security Council under the Biden administration. Mira Rapp-Hooper, previously a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, serves as a senior advisor on China at the Policy Planning Staff of the State Department. In summary, it can be said that the liberal hawks have truly regained power in foreign policy and national security arena of the U.S. after the end of the Cold War.

Second, influenced by domestic politics, the liberal hawks have begun additional left-wing reforms in the field of foreign affairs and security ever since they took power. Biden could not have won the 2020 presidential election without the support of the radical left. Therefore, the liberal hawks with policy experience and expertise should not only rebuild the national security institutions, which were severely impacted during the Trump era but also add other left-wing colors to the layout of the Biden administration in terms of national security. The liberal hawks pushed for such changes when they came to power.

On the one hand, the White House issued the Memorandum on Revitalizing America's Foreign Policy and National Security Workforce, Institutions, and Partnerships in February 2021, which prioritized diversity, equality, inclusion, and accessibility as priorities. According to the memorandum, institutions on foreign affairs and national security led by the liberal hawks have introduced reform measures that highlight left-wing elements, such as gender rights, cultural diversity, and anti-racism. Lloyd Austin, the U.S. Secretary of Defense, issued the Memorandum for All Department of Defense Employees shortly after taking office and proposed to ensure "accountable leadership," not tolerating sexual assault and harassment and working to stamp out extremism among the ranks permanently.¹ Antony Blinken, the U.S. Secretary of State, has invested heavily in building a diverse and inclusive diplomatic workforce. He appointed Gina Abercrombie-Winstanley, who previously served as the U.S. ambassador to Malta from 2012 to 2016, as the chief diversity and inclusion officer for the U.S. Department of State. William Burns, CIA Director, made strengthening the diversity and inclusion of the personnel of the agency and promoting the talent development cooperation between the CIA and minority-serving institutions his top priorities.

On the other hand, the liberal hawks promoted left-wing diplomatic agendas, such as democracy, human rights, and climate change. In terms of democracy and human rights and in response to the Presidential Initiative for Democratic Renewal, proposed by Biden at the Global Summit for Democracy, Secretary of State Blinken proposed a series of supplementary measures, which included combating corruption, bolstering democratic reformers, and promoting free and fair elections. Samantha Power, the Administrator of the U.S. Agency for International Development, announced a large investment in tackling the so-called digital authoritarianism. In terms of climate change, the liberal hawks have followed the stance of Biden and placed climate change at the core of foreign security policy. The Office of the Director of National Intelligence, led by Avril Haines, released the National Intelligence Estimate, which predicts the challenges to climate change security in future decades. The Department of De-

¹ "Memorandum for All Department of Defense Employees," accessed May 6, 2022, <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Mar/04/2002593656/-1/-1/0/SECRETARY-LLOYD-J-AUSTIN-III-MESSAGE-TO-THE-FORCE.PDF>.

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fense, led by Lloyd Austin, released the Department of Defense Climate Risk Analysis, which analyzes the impact of climate factors on the military readiness of the U.S. The Department of Homeland Security, led by Alejandro Mayorkas, established the Climate Change Action Group and developed the DHS Strategic Framework for Addressing Climate Change. These initiatives put forth solutions to the impact of climate change on immigration and the natural environment. From the perspective of the liberal hawks, these reforms can help boost the morale and vitality of the diplomatic and security services despised and undermined during the Trump era and serve partisan political needs at the same time.

Third, the liberal hawks during the Biden administration not only adhered to the basic principles of the liberal internationalist strategy but also created new policies on the basis of changes in the international and domestic security scenarios. Since the end of World War II, regardless of the changes that occurred in the external security environment of the U.S., the core strategic principles upheld by the liberal hawks remained consistent. In other words, the U.S. must insist on participating in instead of withdrawing from international affairs and play a leading role in various major international issues. Moreover, the U.S. must maintain and lead the rule-based international order through comprehensive diplomatic, military, economic, and other methods for demonstrating the influence of American values. In addition, the U.S. must maintain and deepen its alliances and partnerships and use its allies to consolidate its position of strength. Over the years, the liberal hawks have internalized these principles as strategic traditions and presuppositions for policymaking. Even as the position of power of America was shaken, Biden and his the liberal hawks clearly proposed that the U.S. should lead the world again.

At the same time, the liberal hawks did not simply resort to previous policies to meet new challenges but also sought to adjust and innovate in many ways. First, in the face of the damage to the foundation of power, the liberal hawks proposed a foreign policy for the middle class in an effort to integrate domestic and foreign policies. Traditionally, elite the liberal hawks had been confident in the superiority of American power. However, Trump's victory during the 2016 presidential election prompted the liberal hawks to reflect on previous policy mistakes and to recognize that the emergence of Trumpism was

closely related to the disconnect between foreign policy and domestic agendas.¹ The liberal hawks changed the mindset of technocratic mentality about foreign policy to a certain extent and considered the more domestic vision of middle-class revitalization the foothold of foreign policy. Second, in terms of the excessive militarization of foreign policy, the liberal hawks have updated the manner of using power based on strategic contraction. They believed that the previous foreign strategic layout was extremely reliant on military means, which not only caused a heavy burden on the U.S. but also led to difficulty in responding to increasingly complex and diverse nontraditional security threats. Therefore, the Biden team proposed policy goals, such as the use of force as a last resort and the end of the endless war in Afghanistan and the Middle East, during the campaign. After Biden took office, he reduced the strategic presence of the U.S. in the Middle East, completed the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan, and placed more emphasis on integrated deterrence, which integrates economic and diplomatic tools. Third, the liberal hawks created new interactions among allies and partners. They noted that the system of overseas allies, which originated during the Cold War, is incapable of handling new security challenges. However, they continued to regard the system of allies as America's greatest asset and innovate. They used new issues, such as digital and climate change, to consolidate the traditional alliance between the U.S. and Europe. Moreover, they relied on anti-pandemic cooperation and supply chain security cooperation to further consolidate the quadrilateral security dialog among the U.S., Japan, India, and Australia. They also established a U.S.–United Kingdom–Australia security partnership, which shares extremely sensitive weapons and technologies. The aforementioned policy adjustments and innovations were reflective of the efforts exerted by the liberal hawks to restore American hegemony in the new strategic environment. Additionally, they are a concrete manifestation of the pursuit of the Biden administration to lead the world again.

¹ “The Inexorable Rise of Jake Sullivan,” accessed May 7, 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/11/27/jake-sullivan-biden-national-security-440814>.

II

Since the 2017 report of the National Security Strategy of the U.S. listed China as the most consequential strategic competitor, the U.S. policy toward China systematically has shifted to a competition-focused tone. In recent years, the China policy has become the primary concern of the U.S. in the field of foreign affairs and security. In particular, Trump placed extreme pressure on China during the late period of the administration, which led China–U.S. relations to encounter unprecedented difficulties since the establishment of diplomatic relations. Against this background, Biden also attached great importance to the China issue and continued the general trend of competition initiated by the previous government with China after taking office. However, the current China policy led by the liberal hawks has not been a passive succession from the previous government. In fact, the liberal hawks have long accumulated awareness of threat emanating from China and have considered the adjustment of the China policy before taking power.

The liberal hawks of the Democratic Party have always regarded the maintenance and promotion of American values as the core national interests. They have exhibited profound differences from China in the political and ideological fields and continued to put pressure on China. More than 100 years ago, Woodrow Wilson, the then-president of the U.S., had advocated idealistic diplomacy that focused on the promotion of American values. Ever since, ideological expansion and foreign intervention have become the major features of the foreign policy of the Democratic Party. After the end of the Cold War, the liberal hawks of the Democratic Party have never abandoned their hostility and interference with China in the political and ideological fields although they supported engagement with China with an eye on geopolitical, economic, and trade interests. During the Clinton administration, Former U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher had announced that the U.S. sought a broad, peaceful evolution with China, that is, from communism to democracy. Democrats who advocated human rights in Congress, such as Nancy Pelosi, have continued to criticize the human rights situation of China in Congress. Therefore, the U.S. government has previously regarded human rights issues as a prerequisite for the question of whether to extend the most-favored-nation treatment to China. During the

Obama era, the liberal hawks have taken the so-called Internet freedom issue as a new tool for putting pressure on China. Then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had openly insinuated that China violated the fundamental rights of Internet users and faced risks, which isolate itself from the progress of the next century. Since the Biden administration took office, the battle between democracy and autocracy has become the core issue of the competitive politics of the liberal hawks against China. Under the guidance of the pan-ideological concept, the Biden administration has continued to push forward China-related negative policies on issues related to Taiwan, Xinjiang, and Hong Kong. In addition, it also implemented a diplomatic boycott of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics and called it a statement of principle. For a long time, political and ideological issues have been the levers used by the liberal hawks to check China.

Simultaneously, the liberal hawks have long noticed that China holds the potential to become a strategic opponent of the U.S. and have always been wary of the challenge posed by China in the post-Cold War era. After the end of the Cold War, the strategic vigilance of the liberal hawks against China has remained consistent. In 1995, Joseph Nye, the Assistant Secretary of Defense during the Clinton administration, played a key role in the development of the U.S. Security Strategy for the East Asia-Pacific Region. The report alleged the following:

China's military posture and development have a great impact on the expectations and behavior of other states in the region. Although China's leaders insist their military build-up is defensive and commensurate with China's overall economic growth, others in the region cannot be certain of China's intentions, which intended to justify the forward deployment of U.S. army.¹

During the Bush administration, Kurt Campbell (who worked for an American think tank) and Michael O'Hanlon (Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution) proposed the following: ... As a result of its military operations in the Middle East, the U.S. is dangerously distracted from the rapidly changing landscape of Asia at a time when China is making enormous strides in its military modernization, commercial conquests, diplomatic inroads, and application

¹ "United States Security Strategy for the East Asia-Pacific Region," accessed May 9, 2022, <https://worldjpn.grips.ac.jp/documents/texts/JPUS/19950227.O1E.html>.

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of soft power.¹

Campbell's viewpoint has reflected that the liberal hawks did not relax their attention toward China even in the context of the full commitment of the U.S. to global anti-terrorism at the time. During the Obama administration, Hillary Clinton declared that the 21st century will be the Pacific century of America and promoted the strategy of Rebalance in the Asia-Pacific region. The previous strategic focus on China has gradually transformed into a real check and balance. In 2016, Kurt Campbell (co-founder of the Center for a New American Security) elucidated in a policy report, which was prepared for the next administration, that China's spectacular economic growth and its increased military spending will exert a profound impact on the Asian region. Thus, the management of the U.S.–China relations is, without a doubt, the single most consequential challenge for foreign policy in the U.S.² Secretary of State Blinken has argued that relations with China comprise the biggest geopolitical test of the U.S. in the 21st century. CIA director William Burns has outlined that China has been the single most significant geopolitical challenge to the U.S. for a long time.

A debate on the China policy emerged in the U.S. in 2014–2015. Since then, the policy of engagement with China has been increasingly questioned. However, until Trump took office, the establishment's diplomatic elites represented by the liberal hawks were unable to decide conclusively to completely change the strategic tone of engagement with China. Afterward, the Trump administration officially launched its strategic competition with China. The perception of the U.S. about China underwent a major change from top to bottom, which has shaken China–U.S. relations in an unprecedented manner. In the face of changes in the general environment, the liberal hawks accepted this paradigm shift in the China policy but only partially agreed with the policies of the Trump administration. After taking power, they have revised and supplemented their strategic competition with China in their own way.

First, the liberal hawks have further improved the strategic logic of the

¹ Kurt M. Campbell and Michael E. O'Hanlon, *Hard Power; The New Politics of National Security*, Basic Books, 2006, 189.

² Eric S. Edelman, et al., "Extending American Power Strategies to Expand U.S. Engagement in a Competitive World Order," accessed May 9, 2022, <https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/files.cnas.org/documents/CNASReport-EAP-FINAL-1.pdf?mtime=20160915105340&focal=none>.

competition with China. Previously, the Trump administration took confrontational measures in the fields of economy, trade, diplomacy, science and technology, and public opinion to demonstrate its toughness toward China. However, right-wing populist forces more frequently used this toughness to capture public opinion, which typically exhibits anti-intellectualism tendencies. Therefore, the China policy of the Trump administration frequently became emotional and extreme. The liberal hawks, such as Jake Sullivan, combined their work experiences to conduct a unique analysis of the so-called strategic competition before taking power. He believed that whenever foreign policymakers placed the word strategic before a noun, it typically indicates they are relatively unsure of the object of their pursuit.¹ Moreover, they believed that answering questions related to the direction of China–U.S. relations—such as “What are China and the U.S. competing for?” and “What does winning actually look like?”—is necessary in the competition with China. Before taking power, the liberal hawks affirmed that the basic mistake of engagement was to assume that it could lead to fundamental changes to the political system, economy, and foreign policy in China. They outlined that the U.S. should not seek an end state similar to that at the conclusion of the Cold War with China. Instead, it should pursue a sensible and stable state of coexistence beneficial to the interests and values of the U.S. In addition, they stressed that the economic and technological competition between China and the U.S. denotes an emerging contest of models. China may ultimately present a stronger ideological challenge than the Soviet Union did.² From the point of view of the liberal hawks, the starting point of the U.S. policy toward China is to maintain its leading position and system dominance. The ultimate goal is to make China suffer from high competition costs through complex games, such that it can no longer possess the strength and determination to challenge the hegemony of the U.S.. Simultaneously, the second goal is to conduct necessary cooperation with China on issues of common concern. After

¹ “Transcript: Jake Sullivan and Kurt Campbell Talk with Michael Morell on ‘Intelligence Matters’,” accessed May 11, 2022, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/transcript-jake-sullivan-and-kurt-campbell-talk-with-michael-morell-on-intelligence-matters/>.

² Kurt M. Campbell and Jake Sullivan, “Competition Without Catastrophe: How American Can Both Challenge and Coexist With China,” *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2019, Vol. 98, No. 5, 96-110.

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taking power, the liberal hawks began to establish a new discourse on the China policy based on the aforementioned logic and formally proposed that the relationship with China will be competitive when it should be, collaborative when it can be, and adversarial when it must be. In other words, the U.S. side does not seek to transform the political system in China. In May 2022, Blinken delivered a speech on the China policy of the Biden administration and summarized the current policy of the U.S. toward China as “invest, align, and compete,” which declares the logic completion of the China strategy of the liberal hawks. Moreover, the liberal hawks intend to integrate competition with China into a systemic change through a national security strategy that re-enforces liberal hegemony. Sullivan believes that the resignation of the Trump administration provided an opportunity for the U.S. to reshape its diplomatic and security strategies. In addition, anchoring China as a near-peer competitor is an inevitable decision for demonstrating the unique leadership of the U.S. Through competition with China, the U.S. can better respond to the interests of the domestic middle class, reunite the cracked alliance system, and reenergize the spiritual driving force of the foreign strategy of the U.S.; that is to say, American exceptionalism entails for the U.S. the unique mission of transforming the world.

Second, the liberal hawks have refined their policy layout for competition with China. During the Trump era, the strategic layout of the U.S. for the “whole-of-government” competition with China began to materialize. However, based on the effect, the competition of the Trump administration with China was mainly related to resource focus and willingness mobilization, and the policy implementation was imprecise. Therefore, the liberal hawks further elucidated the meaning of China as a strategic competitor based on adherence to the strategy of international liberalism. They declared that China the only country that possesses the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological powers to seriously challenge the stable and open international system. By clarifying this concept, the liberal hawks fundamentally differentiated their competitive China policy from the extreme pressure policy of the right-wing populist forces that view China as an existential threat. Moreover, they distinguished their policy from the engagement policy of the previous establishment, based on concepts such as constructive strategic partnership and responsible stakeholder.

On the one hand, after taking power, the liberal hawks did not rush to with-

draw the policy of the Trump administration to put pressure on China. Instead, they rapidly formed a capable force for comprehensively reviewing China's policy in an effort to strengthen the strong points and compensate for shortcomings. Institutions, such as the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative, the Department of Defense, and the CIA, established special mechanisms in relation to China to discuss the key areas of competition with China, to assess the situation and policy effects, and to establish additional systematic arrangements. Trade Representative Katherine Tai and other hardline economic and trade officials intend to curb the economic behavior of China, which harms the interests of the U.S., and promote the return of manufacturing to the U.S. They not only maintained the tariff on China imposed by the Trump administration but also did not rule out the launching of a new round of trade investigations against China. Ely Ratner (Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs) led the formation of the China task force of the Defense Department. The reexamination of the military policy toward China laid the foundation for the subsequent introduction of the concept of integrated deterrence and an updated national defense strategy. CIA Director William Burns announced the establishment of the China Mission Center in the CIA, which intends to increase the manpower reserve for China and respond to the China threat from the global perspective.

On the other hand, under the leadership of the liberal hawks, the Biden administration increased the use of multilateral diplomacy in its competition with China and introduced the forces of allies and partners, particularly valued by liberal internationalist strategies at all levels, in an effort to make China feel more systemic pressure. The political and military structures dominated by western countries, such as the G7 and NATO, were strengthened, once again, under the banner of ideology. The context of addressing China significantly increased. Trans-Atlantic relations were restored. The U.S. and Europe established the European Union–U.S. Trade and Technology Council, which focused on coordinating the technology competition with China and launched a dialog on China-related issues. The Indo-Pacific was placed at the core of the competition with China. Moreover, strategic coordination against China was broadened under the U.S.–Japan–India–Australia Quadrilateral Security Dialog to maintain a rules-based international order, which increasingly focused on sensitive issues, such as the Taiwan question. The U.S.–Japan, U.S.–Korea,

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U.S.–Australia, and other traditional alliances exhibited increasingly prominent intentions toward China. ASEAN received more strategic attention than it did in the Trump era, and more than 10 regional allies and partners echoed the new Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, a new plan aimed at gaining geo-economic competitive advantage over China.

Third, the liberal hawks adjusted the limits and space for competition with China to be more in line with the overall political agenda of the Democratic Party. In the context of intensified partisan political struggles, the liberal hawks were more concerned with the interests and political culture of the Democratic Party in terms of formulating relevant policies. The tactics of the liberal hawks are more flexible on certain domestic political concerns and issues related to China, a far cry from the nearly limitless confrontational approach of the Trump administration. For example, in response to climate change, about which right-wing populists are less concerned when compared with Democratic and liberal voters, the liberal hawks intend to strengthen the cooperation with China in this field to respond to domestic calls. Since taking office, John Kerry (U.S. special presidential envoy for climate) was in contact with China many times and reached some consensus on the joint response to climate issues between China and the U.S. Another example is that Democrats and liberal voters, as supporters of cultural diversity, cannot accept that certain pressure measures against China during the Trump era have intensified discrimination and hatred against Asian Americans. Since the Biden administration took office, many Asian-American groups, academic institutions, and progressives called for the cancellation of The China Initiative launched by the Department of Justice during the Trump administration. The reason was that the plan was clearly racially oppressive against Chinese scientific and engineering personnel. Toward this end, Matt Olsen (Assistant Attorney General for National Security) announced the end of the controversial judicial action in February 2022. Moreover, he proposed that Americans must remain vigilant in ensuring that no one is treated differently on the basis of race, ethnicity, familial ties, or national origin. In his speech on May 26, 2022, Blinken specifically mentioned that the competitive policy of the U.S. for China should not encourage racism against Asian Americans within the territory

of the U.S.¹ However, these tactical adjustments do not mean that the liberal hawks will reduce the intensity of competition with China. Instead, they seek policy clarification, such that the aforementioned adjustments are not misconstrued as compromising with China. Blinken emphasized that climate issues are not traded. Moreover, he claimed that if the U.S. does not increase its investment, China may gain dominance in the climate field in the future.² He also elucidated that the U.S. is profoundly different from the Chinese government. The Department of Justice of the U.S. launched the Strategy for Countering Nation-State Threats while ending the China initiative. It stated that the U.S. will continue to focus on the actions of the Chinese government and its agents.³

III

Although the liberal hawks possess full power in the realm of foreign affairs and security, domestic and foreign challenges and the response from China will exert a certain impact on the promotion of strategic competition with China.

First, the ongoing Ukraine crisis has placed the liberal hawks in a strategic challenge of focusing on competition with China. At the end of February 2022, the Ukraine crisis became a major event that affected the geopolitical situation at the global level. Moreover, the impact of this event continued to fester. Since the implementation of the strategy of Rebalance in the Asia-Pacific region during the Obama administration, the liberal hawks pushed the global strategic focus of the U.S. eastward, which closely integrates this process with its China policy. To a certain extent, the current Indo-Pacific strategy dominated by the liberal hawks can be viewed as a continuation of the eastward shift of the stra-

¹ “The Administration’s Approach to the People’s Republic of China,” accessed May 28, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/the-administrations-approach-to-the-peoples-republic-of-china/>.

² “Blinken Says U.S. Falling Behind China in Shaping Climate Future,” accessed May 20, 2022, <https://www.bqprime.com/politics/blinking-says-u-s-falls-behind-china-in-shaping-climate-future>.

³ “Assistant Attorney General Matthew Olsen Delivers Remarks on Countering Nation-State Threats,” accessed May 20, 2022, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/speech/assistant-attorney-general-matthew-olsen-delivers-remarks-countering-nation-state-threats>.

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tegic focus, which was not perfected during the tenure of Obama. In addition, the strategic competition with China was internalized as the core link of this process. However, the manner of manipulating strategic attention and investment in China and Russia, which has plagued the policy circle of the U.S. for a long time, became unprecedentedly prominent. In its Fact Sheet: 2022 National Defense Strategy, the Biden administration stated that it would prioritize the China challenge in the Indo-Pacific followed by the Russia challenge in Europe. Kurt Campbell also emphasized that the Biden administration will not ignore its response to the Indo-Pacific Region because of a few urgent challenges as earlier. Sullivan even proposed that the current U.S. strategy in Europe and in the Indo-Pacific region reached a certain degree of mutual reinforcement.¹ However, certain experts with practical experience in foreign policy in the U.S. questioned the aforementioned statement and argued that time is limited and so are the energies of senior advisors and cabinet ministers. Simultaneously addressing multiple crises and strategic agendas is extremely difficult.² Although the liberal hawks subjectively hope that the measures for the Ukraine crisis will not influence the strategy of competition against China in the Indo-Pacific region, whether their strategies against China and Russia can achieve the expected results remain unknown.

Second, acquiring allies and partners is extremely difficult to perfectly match the U.S. with their China policy. Allies and partners are important aides used by the liberal hawks to regulate China; however, they remain uncertain on the layout of the strategic competition of the U.S. with China. The liberal hawks mobilized NATO and the G7 to increase their attention toward China and strengthened the U.S.–Japan–India–Australia quadrilateral mechanism to fight China for the so-called Indo-Pacific order. However, the allies and partners of the U.S. in Europe and Asia only partially linked their China policy to the vision of the U.S. For instance, the new Chancellor of Germany Olaf Scholz stated that the China policy must be consistent with the actual situation. The

¹ “Press Briefing by Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan,” accessed May 21, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/press-briefings/2022/05/18/press-briefing-by-press-secretary-karine-jean-pierre-and-national-security-advisor-jake-sullivan-may-18-2022/>.

² “Why Russia’s War in Ukraine Complicates President Biden’s First Trip to Asia,” accessed May 21, 2022, <https://www.latimes.com/politics/story/2022-05-19/why-russias-war-in-ukraine-complicates-president-bidens-first-trip-to-asia>.

new president of the Philippines Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos Jr. declared that he will elevate the bilateral ties between Philippines and China to a higher level. An important reason why the liberal hawks who value alliance politics experienced difficulty in convincing allies and partners to achieve the desired effect of unanimous action against China is the incompatibility between the alliance system of the U.S. and the China challenge. The alliance system of the U.S. originated from the need to contain the Soviet Union during the Cold War and focused on military alliances. The development of China’s strength exerted an impact on the hegemonic system of the U.S. in economy, science and technology, and military. Many allies and partners of the U.S. have developed close economic and trade ties and cultural exchanges with China while maintaining their alliance with the U.S. This complex relationship makes the construction of a highly unified and connected alliance against China difficult for the U.S. In addition, in recent years, the resurgence of isolationism promoted by right-wing populist forces has reduced the strategic credibility of hegemony in the U.S. and made other countries place increased emphasis on strategic autonomy instead of blindly following the U.S. in terms of decision-making. Liberal hawks intended to intensify competition on economic and trade rules with China in the Asia-Pacific region by creating the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework. However, coordinating with countries that have varying levels of development and interests to reach a consensus and promoting a truly binding and substantive economic strategy are sizeable challenges for the U.S. The liberal hawks intend to increase the flexibility of the overseas alliance system and focus on specific issues in terms of countering and deterring China. However, the new U.S.–United Kingdom–Australia tripartite security partnership hurt other relationships and caused worry for a few ASEAN members. Thus, the study infers that many internal contradictions continue to require resolution to enable the liberal hawks to deeply integrate their allies and partners.

Third, the domestic political and economic difficulties will render the strategic competition of the liberal hawks against China increasingly complicated and tortuous. On the one hand, in a highly polarized political atmosphere, the China policy dominated by the liberal hawks, who are relatively centrist and full of establishment elitism, relatively lies in the middle of the political spectrum. Radicals in the Republican and Democratic Parties attack the China pol-

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icy of the liberal hawks. The Republican Party, which is increasingly formed by right-wing populist forces, aims to consider a hardline China policy as one that only it can make. Its attack on the weakness of the Biden administration toward China is becoming one of the main methods of its partisan struggle with the Democratic Party. In particular, a few hawkish Republicans in the Senate and the House suggest that certain the liberal hawks in the Biden administration have served in the private sector. In this regard, they questioned whether they could be tough toward China due to their potential interests in China. Simultaneously, the radical left only partially agrees with the China policy of the liberal hawks. It believes that exaggerating the *China threat* helps interest groups, such as the military-industrial complex, which not only fails to bring security and prosperity to ordinary American people but also influences cooperation with China to address global challenges.¹

On the other hand, the China competition plan of the liberal hawks emphasizes strength building through domestic reconstruction. However, domestic economic problems and the doubts of the Republican Party about the domestic reconstruction agenda of the Democratic Party have influenced the implementation of the competition against China by the Biden administration. Affected by aggressive fiscal stimulus measures and increasing global energy prices since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the domestic economic inflation in the U.S. is becoming severe, and public dissatisfaction with the Biden administration is increasing. To solve these domestic difficulties, a few U.S. officials proposed the cancellation of tariffs imposed on a few non-strategic Chinese products to ease the pressure off consumers, whereas other hardline officials advocate to retain the tariff pressure on China. This tactical debate reflects the ambivalence of the liberal hawks in the specific implementation of competition with China. In addition, the 2022 America COMPETES Act is dominated by House Democrats and viewed by the liberal hawks as tied to the domestic Build-Back-Better agenda and capable of boosting competitiveness against China. In terms of this Act, however, many House Republicans withhold support on the grounds that much of the content is unrelated to competition with China.

¹ Bernie Sanders, “Washington’s Dangerous New Consensus on China: Don’t Start Another Cold War,” accessed June 2, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2021-06-17/washingtons-dangerous-new-consensus-china>.

Finally, the future prospects of the strategic competition with China are also closely related to the response from China. During the Biden administration, Campbell publicly declared that the engagement policy has passed and that the dominant policy paradigm in the future will become competitive.¹ China–U.S. relations are highly complex. The economic interests of the two countries are deeply intertwined; however, differences between them are noted in security interests and values. Simultaneously, both are concerned about global issues, such as climate change and non-proliferation. These complex relations are by no means singly summarized by the word competition. The liberal hawks look forward to seeing to the combination of allies and partners to create a many-to-one advantageous scenario against China on important issues, which will eventually lead China to retreat. Essentially, the zero-sum competitive thinking of the liberal hawks is a repetition of the camp confrontation during the Cold War. Moreover, its fundamental objective is to maintain the hegemony of the U.S. Alternatively, China opposes the use of competition to define bilateral relations and proposes mutual respect, peaceful coexistence, and win–win cooperation in the communication with the Biden administration. This initiative exceeds the strategic competition framework of the U.S. and reflects the profound insight of China into the nature of bilateral relations, which is mutually beneficial and win–win. At present, although the liberal hawks propose that “competitive when it should be, collaborative when it can be and adversarial when it must be,” the manner of coordinating the three strategies in concrete practice remains under exploration. With the improvement of its strategic formulation ability, China intends to exhibit greater initiatives in the interaction between China and the U.S. in the new era. On the basis of safeguarding its sovereignty, security, and development interests, China maintains openness to dialog and cooperation with the U.S.. We should prevent China and the U.S. from falling into the confrontation trap, which is guided by the narrow concept of competition, and promote a resilient strategic and stable relations between the two countries.

¹ “White House Top Asia Policy Officials Discuss U.S. China Strategy at APARC’s Oksenberg Conference,” accessed June 2, 2022, <https://fsi.stanford.edu/news/white-house-top-asia-policy-officials-discuss-us-china-strategy-aparc%E2%80%99s-oksenberg-conference>.

Conclusion

Since the Biden administration took office, the liberal hawks have planned to revive the hegemony of the U.S. under the banner of middle-class diplomacy and have regarded strategic competition with China as the core element in restoring such hegemony. However, changes in the domestic and international scenarios in the U.S. have posed a real challenge to the continued focus of the liberal hawks on competition with China. Based on public statements, the premise of the competition with China, as envisaged by the liberal hawks, is that the U.S. must maintain its advantage. The competition is fierce, but the result may not lead to mutual destruction. The two sides can not only coexist but also cooperate on certain issues of mutual concern. The liberal hawks have established this framework of strategic competition, which differs from the strategy of maximum pressure. In other words, they recognize that bilateral relations are complex.

The liberal hawks claim that alliances with other countries are not intended to create an anti-China coalition; simultaneously, they call on democratic countries to unite and show China a different vision model. They declare that the objective of the U.S. is to elicit the best from China and the U.S. through stable and peaceful competition, and they propose the use of tougher means to prevent China from gaining advantage at the same time. While they advocate the necessity of cooperation with China, they never forget to stress that cooperation is not in exchange for benefits or political concessions. This two-faced attitude toward China stems from the fascination of the liberal hawks with hegemony and reflects their confusion about being in harmony with China in the new era. It also enables hawkish Republicans, who advocate extreme toughness toward China, to find an excuse. Therefore, in reality, the China policy of the liberal hawks is more about competition and confrontation, such that bilateral cooperation with China is restricted.

As the Biden administration approaches its mid-term in power, the public support and political advantages it enjoyed in the early days have lessened due to domestic and foreign challenges. Moreover, the efforts of the Republican Party to implement a political counterattack that focuses on the mid-term elections are increasing. Liberal thinkers suggest that the Biden administration learn from the history of the reforms initiated by Truman and the Cold War. Conser-

vative observers compare the current predicament of the Biden administration with the internal and external predicaments of the U.S. during the Carter era in the late 1970s, which was an attempt to reproduce a victory of Reagan-style conservatism. Truman and Reagan, who belonged to different political camps in history, opted to be tough on the USSR against the backdrop of profound changes in domestic and foreign scenarios. This tendency indicates that even if the U.S. continues to retain the possibility of a partial relaxation of its China policy, the systemic competitive situation will persist beyond the political cycle for a long time. The increasingly fierce strategic competition of the U.S. evidently exacerbates the tension between China and the U.S. and increases the risk of conflict between the two sides, which is not in the common interests of China, the U.S., or the world.

A few U.S. strategists have warned of the dangers of the maintenance of intense competition with China by the Biden administration:

In the real world, there are competing and coexisting major powers, none of which are likely to disintegrate in the face of foreign disapproval nor to achieve an across the board victory There is no higher priority than avoiding a slide toward war.¹

In the face of the in-depth adjustment of international political and economic relations and transnational security challenges, the liberal hawks and other political forces in the U.S. need to view and address relations with China in a rational and pragmatic manner instead of tightly tying the China policy with the maintenance of hegemony.

¹ “Biden’s China Policy Needs to Be More Than Just Trump Lite,” accessed May 24, 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2022/01/25/bidens-china-policy-needs-to-be-more-than-just-trump-lite/>.