

US posturing on China must go beyond rhetoric

by **Nick Bisley**

Australian Financial Review, 6 October 2021

Link: <https://www.afr.com/world/asia/us-posturing-on-china-must-go-beyond-rhetoric-20211003-p58wqi>

Framed as the Indo-Pacific, Asia is the Biden administration's theatre of strategic priority. But doubts linger about Washington's ability to match its words with deeds.

The contours of US Asia policy under the Biden administration have become clearer through the recent high-profile visits to the region by Vice-President Kamala Harris, Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin and Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman, on top of the launch of the [AUKUS arrangements](#).

Although the tone is different from the bombast of the Trump presidency, the visits and the new grouping reveal much more continuity than change in Washington's approach.

This was most articulated in two speeches in Singapore: Secretary Austin's Fullerton Lecture in late July and Vice-President Harris's remarks to the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy in late August. Above all else, they sought to reiterate that the US retains its long-term commitment to the region.

The US has been the dominant military power in Asia since the 1940s and these speeches confirm it intends to maintain its geopolitical primacy. But neither squarely addressed the reality that rising Chinese power and ambition make Washington's decades-old regional role more difficult, risky and expensive than in the past.

They also sought to emphasise how the United States sees collaboration with partners in the region as fundamental to maintaining its preferred configuration of the regional order. This continues the practice that has been at the heart of US strategy for decades – a necessity given that Washington is a non-resident power that sees [military force](#) as the central component of its regional presence.

The message was a reaffirmation of the value of its allies and partners in an unstated contrast with former US president Donald Trump's clear disdain for many of those arrangements. That was a theme also underscored in the AUKUS announcement. This emphasis is an indirect rebuke to China in that the United

States retains a wide array of friends, partners and allies, while Beijing has only North Korea.

Harris and Austin also sought to clarify how Washington intends to approach China over the coming years. US leaders have, aside from Trump, historically tended to avoid direct criticism of China or been oblique in their approach, whereas Harris and Austin pointed the finger at Beijing as a disruptive and problematic power in the region.

Although Washington clearly [wants a change in China's behaviour](#), both sought to emphasise how their approach will be focused on competition rather than confrontation.

Beyond the big-picture signalling, Austin's speech was notable for its illustration of the power of democracy through his open concession that the United States does not always get things right and that the country has its share of shortcomings. The openness to acknowledge flaws and to correct course was on display in his remarks.

That such remarks were voiced by the country's first African-American secretary of defence – a community well versed in the failings of the US government – gave them added potency. The contrast to the thin-skinned authoritarianism of Xi Jinping's China could not have been more stark.

Whether conscious or not, the tone and tenor adopted in these speeches – confident, measured and rhetorically low-key – struck the right note. The hyperbole and histrionics of the previous four years will not add further complication to what is already a challenging regional context.

Framed as the Indo-Pacific, Asia is the Biden administration's theatre of strategic priority. But even in the face of repeated statements by senior officials, doubts linger about Washington's ability to match its words with deeds.

From the US defence budget to the number of Asia experts in the Washington administration, it remains a challenge to get the vast machinery of government to shift its focus away from the North Atlantic and Middle East.

The Australian submarine agreement at the centre of the AUKUS announcement is in part about providing regional allies with the wherewithal to do more, and this may help at the margin. But the sense that there is a significant gap between Washington's rhetoric and action remains strong.

While Washington seems to have finally grasped the scale of the China challenge and something of a consensus has formed within the Beltway, there remains significant work to do before Asia becomes the centre of US strategy. So long as

that remains the case, the structural advantages that Beijing enjoys due to its location will strengthen its regional hand.

It is also unclear whether the United States can sustain the distinction between competition and confrontation established by the Biden team. The line is relatively easy to maintain across trade, industry policy and technological innovation, but it is inherently challenging in matters of defence and strategy.

In the context of a dominant power facing off against an ambitious country, ensuring that interaction is shaped by the cooler considerations of competition rather than the heat of confrontation will be difficult indeed.

Austin's speech was a study in contrasts. First, between the United States affirming its wide array of partnerships against China's essentially solo act. Second, between Washington's open, tolerant and self-correcting polity and Beijing's closed, fragile and insecure system.

Yet despite Austin's distinction between the current government and that which came before, there is far more continuity than change between Biden and Trump's approaches to Asia. There is no meaningful shift in either the ends or means of US strategy. Engagement with China has been replaced by geopolitical competition for influence in Asia.

Biden is – and Trump was – a president focused foremost on domestic concerns. The question is whether Biden will be more successful at corralling Chinese power and influence to retain US centrality than his predecessor.

Nick Bisley is Dean of Humanities and Social Sciences and Professor of International Relations at La Trobe University. He is also a member of the Advisory Council of China Matters.