

# [***Asia-Focused Foreign Policy Is Not Isolationism | Opinion***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BJ1-JXJ1-JBR6-9117-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Highlight:** A pivot towards Asia has deep roots in U.S. foreign policy, especially among conservatives.

**Body**

The United States stands at a crossroads, confronting the undeniable decline of its relative global power combined with the rising multiplicity of threats from near-peer competitors. The reemergence of an "Asia First" view among many U.S. foreign policy practitioners—especially focused on countering China—is not, as critics claim, a manifestation of a [*neo-isolationism*](https://www.wsj.com/articles/put-america-first-by-aiding-ukraine-putin-invasion-nato-us-economy-jobs-weapons-oil-china-democracy-neo-isolationism-6f4a55ac) but an approach with a deep tradition in American foreign policy. It also reflects the inescapable reality that Washington's [*expansive commitments*](https://www.fpri.org/article/2023/07/the-primacy-trap/) will eventually outstrip its finite resources and that it should direct those resources toward the region destined to define America's role in the 21st century: the Indo-Pacific.

A pivot towards Asia has deep roots in U.S. foreign policy, especially among conservatives. By the end of the 19th century, U.S. victory in the Spanish-American War turned America into a Pacific power. Under President Theodore Roosevelt, Washington dramatically upgraded American foreign policy toward Asia, first by beginning construction of the Panama Canal to forever link America's Atlantic and Pacific coasts, and then building the [*Great White Fleet*](https://www.history.navy.mil/research/histories/ship-histories/the-great-white-fleet.html) to patrol both shores. Roosevelt also implemented the Open Door Policy in China, successfully [*mediated*](https://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/06/opinion/06bradley.html) the Russo-Japanese War, and conducted secret negotiations with Tokyo over spheres of influence in Asia.

In the 1950s, congressional [*Republicans*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/republicans?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) [*coalesced*](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/00323292221094084) around an "[*Asia First*](https://academic.oup.com/chicago-scholarship-online/book/22320/chapter-abstract/182545626?redirectedFrom=fulltext)" alternative to the Marshall Plan and Truman Doctrine, under which the United States spent millions to help Europe rebuild after World War II and supplanted the British in supporting Greece and Turkey against Soviet designs. This influential group of Republicans, led by Senators [*Robert Taft*](https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1952/06/senator-tafts-foreign-policy/641398/) and H. Alexander Smith, viewed Communist [*China*](https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/speech-on-the-north-atlantic-treaty/), rather than the Soviet Union, as the preeminent threat to American foreign policy interests and blamed President Harry Truman for "losing" China. This perspective, while ultimately not adopted by President Dwight Eisenhower, did exert a powerful hold over U.S. foreign policy and influenced U.S. support for countries like South Korea and South Vietnam in their struggle against Communist aggression.

Today, Asia Firsters recognize that U.S. national power is declining relative to China. They also believe that not all geopolitical arenas are strategically equal from the perspective of U.S. interests. Thus, they conclude that a prioritization of resources and energy is necessary.

In economic terms, the United States cannot afford to treat Europe and the Indo-Pacific as a single geopolitical theater. During the Cold War, the United States wielded substantial economic clout, contributing 27 percent of global GDP, while the Soviet Union and China represented a combined 14 percent. Since then, the global landscape has undergone a profound transformation. By 2020, the United States accounted for 16 percent of global GDP, while China and Russia surged to 22 percent.

This decline in America's share of global GDP mirrors its diminishing military dominance. A 2023 RAND [*report*](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA2555-1.html) highlights this shift, emphasizing that the U.S. defense strategy post-Cold War relied on military forces that once held superiority across all domains compared to potential adversaries. However, this superiority has eroded over time. The United States and its allies no longer possess exclusive access to knowledge, technologies, and capabilities that once granted them overwhelming advantages.

This profound shift in economic and military dynamics underscores the imperative of reassessing America's strategic priorities. It also deepens the complexities of providing military assistance to Taiwan and Ukraine, necessitating astute management to navigate the delicate and volatile geopolitical terrain.

Here lies the critical distinction: prioritization is not isolationism. It is a strategic necessity. In an era where finite resources are stretched thin, and the global landscape is rife with challenges, the United States must make choices. "Asia First" cogently recognizes that the Indo-Pacific matters greatly for America's future— both its economic vibrancy and geopolitical position. The rise of China, the dynamism of Southeast Asia, and the intricate tapestry of alliances and partnerships within the region all underscore its profound centrality to American interests.

Asia Firsters are not ignorant of the dangers Moscow poses to Europe. They recognize, for the most part, that Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine was unprovoked, is a clear violation of Ukrainian sovereignty, and threatens European security. They differ from Atlanticists, however, in their belief in two interconnected principles. First, Washington cannot afford to deal with two full-scale wars simultaneously, a lesson learned from the painful experiences of Iraq and Afghanistan. Second, Europe, not America, should be primarily responsible for Ukrainian and European security.

Beyond Taiwan and Ukraine, there's a growing recognition of the vital role played by "pivotal states" in shaping the outcome of the current U.S.-China Cold War and the broader global system because of their strategic location, population size, growing economies, and global supply chain importance. The U.S. will need to prioritize engaging and heavily investing in building alliances and partnerships with India, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, the Philippines, and Vietnam due to their direct impact on the U.S. global position, further accelerating prioritizing Asia over Europe.

In political terms, a move toward Asia is not solely about Trump-versus-Biden, as some [*Europeans*](https://twitter.com/donaldtusk/status/1755487973997457772) may assume; it is rooted more in generational shifts. The pivot to Asia was an [*initiative*](https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/americas-pacific-century/) from the [*Barack Obama*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/barack-obama?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) era, during which [*Joe Biden*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/joe-biden?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships), then vice president, primarily handled European affairs. Asia First materialized in the form of a centrist Democrat from a post-9/11, post-Cold War era who, for various reasons, placed China and the broader Indo-Pacific region as his top priority. While the Cold War's transatlantic alliance shaped Biden's political career, it's crucial to recognize that his journey began in an era quite distinct from today's geopolitics.

Europeans would be mistaken to interpret Asia First as an indication of a growing isolationist sentiment within the Republican Party. Even among [*Democrats*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/democrats?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships), a post-Biden era is likely to usher in a shift in perspective, with younger, more diverse leaders emphasizing transnational issues like [*climate change*](https://www.npr.org/2019/02/07/691997301/rep-alexandria-ocasio-cortez-releases-green-new-deal-outline) and migration and domestic issues such as racial and economic inequality over traditional NATO-centric priorities. While the Biden era may offer comfort, it may eventually clash with the evolving realities of global ***politics***. Europe's position in the post-Biden world will likely necessitate reassessment and adaptation as the continent's security dynamics and its relationship with the United States are likely to change, no matter who wins in 2024.

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*The views expressed in this article are the writer's own.*

[*Link to Image*](https://d.newsweek.com/en/full/2361255/joe-biden-xi-jinping.jpg)

**Graphic**

Joe Biden and Xi Jinping

Alex Wong/Getty Images

WASHINGTON, DC - NOVEMBER 15: U.S. President Joe Biden participates in a virtual meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping at the Roosevelt Room of the White House November 15, 2021 in Washington, DC. President Biden met with his Chinese counterpart to discuss bilateral issues.

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