

# GREAT DECISIONS

## *Winter 2022 Update*

**Outer Space • Climate Change • Russia and the U.S. •  
Myanmar and ASEAN • Quad Alliance •  
Drug Policy in Latin America • Biden's Agenda**

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### Outer Space

The rivalry between the United States and its adversaries in outer space, most notably China (and to a lesser extent Russia) shows no signs of abating in 2022. In the past year, China made big strides in space completing a successful landing on Mars, testing a hypersonic missile, and beginning the assembly of a new space station known as Tiangong. Russia also made a show of its progress in space by testing an anti-satellite weapon in November. All of this geopolitical flexing in space has occasionally led to disagreements. In December, China complained to the United Nations that SpaceX's communication satellites were designed to threaten China's space stations. Even though SpaceX is a private entity, China claims that it is the responsibility of the United States to regulate the actions of its non-governmental entities. Robert Walker, former GOP chair of the House Science Committee, predicts "continuing challenges from China and probably even an increase in China and Russia's attacks on our space infrastructure."

In the United States, several steps are being taken in an attempt to maintain American influence as the strongest in space. First, Vice President Kamala Harris, Chair of the National Space Council, is expected to decide between the Commerce Department and the Federal Aviation Administration as lead agency managing the increasing number of satellites orbiting the earth. Deciding which organization will be in charge of this task is the first step in order for the United States to maintain its position as a leader in that domain.

The second major step is NASA's decision to increase spending on the Artemis Program with the goal of reaching \$93 billion by 2025. The ultimate goal of this expenditure increase is to return astronauts to the moon by 2025 and to eventually create a sustainable human presence on the moon. A crucial part of this endeavor is the success of the Space Launch System, a Boeing-built mega rocket that is scheduled to launch in 2022.

Another key step in the U.S. push to secure its spot on the moon is to enlist international partners, which has taken the form of the Artemis Accords. Already more than a dozen countries have signed on. However, Russia and China are pushing to do the same, amassing allies for their goals as well. In early December, Kamala Harris released the "United States Space Priorities Framework," which showcases how the Biden administration plans to develop and implement national space policy. The goals of this framework include promoting and protecting "data, products, services from space" that enable U.S. businesses to create jobs. It also lays out how observation data of the earth can be utilized to address climate change.

One hope for a reduction of tensions in space came about on Christmas eve, when the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution on "Reducing Space Threats through Norms, Rules and Principles of Responsible Behavior." This resolution aims to create some sort of consensus on how countries interact in space, with the potential of reducing tensions.

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## Climate Change

Following the United Nations Conference of the Parties, otherwise known as “COP 26,” the member states signed the Glasgow Climate Pact. This pact reaffirmed several long-term goals, including keeping the increase in global temperatures below 2° C (3.6° F), above pre-industrial levels, and having signatories commit to accelerating the transition to clean energy. Achieving these goals will require country-specific actions to bring about tangible change.

In the United States, President Joseph Biden signed an executive order on December 8 directing the federal government to achieve five goals: 100 % carbon-pollution-free electricity by 2030, 100 % zero-emission vehicle acquisitions by 2035, net-zero emissions from federal procurement no later than 2050, net-zero emissions building portfolio by 2045, net-zero emis-

sions from overall federal operations by 2050. This executive order would be supported by the Build Back Better Act proposed by the Biden administration; however, \$550 billion allocated in the act is currently being held up in congress. The house has passed the act, but it has met opposition in the senate, most notably from Sen. Joe Manchin (D-WV). Manchin, who opposes any measures that he considers a threat to his state’s coal interests, has insisted during negotiations that the most powerful part of the bill be cut out—a clean electricity program designed to reward electrical utilities that stop burning fossil fuels and penalize those that do not. Currently, the funds to support President Biden’s climate goals are stuck in legislative gridlock. There is hope however that Senator Manchin will come around on the climate initiatives. He was quoted this month saying, “The climate thing is one that we probably can come to an agreement on much easier than anything else,” showing that a compromise is possible. Many senate Democrats are determined to see some version of the act pass, all of their votes would be needed to advance the legislation over Republican opposition in the 50–50 senate

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*The UPDATES take into account events up to February 7, 2022.*

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## Russia and the U.S.

Major developments in Russian foreign policy have been playing out in Kazakhstan and Ukraine. In early January, protests erupted in Kazakhstan incited by anger over surging fuel prices. The government responded with force, killing dozens of anti-government demonstrators. The country's largest city, Almaty, was the main site of unrest as protesters seized the airport and set fire to police vehicles. In response, 2,500 troops from the Collective Security Treaty Organization, the Russian version of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), were requested by President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev and were dispatched in early January. Russian President Vladimir Putin considers Kazakhstan, which was once part of the Soviet Union, part of Russia's sphere of influence and wants to maintain a strong Russian presence. The United States considers Putin's response as a show of his determination to maintain a Russian sphere of influence in its neighboring countries. During a meeting with his Kazakh counterpart, Mukhtar Tileuberdi, Secretary of State Antony Blinken "reiterated the United States' full support for Kazakhstan's constitutional institutions and media freedom and advocated for a peaceful, rights-respecting resolution to the crisis." The Kremlin has blamed foreign influence for the unrest but has not mentioned one country in particular. Outside of Kazakhstan, more displays of Russian power could be seen in Ukraine, where 100,000 Russian troops have amassed on the eastern border. Since 2014 when Ukrainians ousted their pro-Russian president, Viktor Yanukovich, Russia has annexed Ukraine's southern Crimean Peninsula and has backed separatists throughout eastern Ukraine. Due to historical, linguistic, and ethnic ties, there is a strong desire on the behalf of Russia to bring Ukraine back into the Russian sphere of influence and remove any pro-western politicians. The Ukrainians who side with the separatists echo these sentiments, creating a rupture in the country between those in favor of the west and those in favor of Russia. The United States, which supports a sovereign Ukraine, has made clear that it will not send troops to Ukraine itself. The main

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tools that President Biden and other western leaders have to use include economic sanctions and military aid. However, Biden is considering deploying several thousand troops to Baltic and eastern European NATO states in an attempt to build up defense and deterrence against Russian aggression.

On Monday January 31, the United States and Russia engaged at the U.N. Security Council to discuss the situation in Ukraine. U.S. ambassador, Linda Thomas-Greenfield claimed that Russia was endangering peace by stationing troops on Ukraine's borders, while her Russian counterpart, Vasily Nebenzia, made the case that the United States was being hysterical. On Tuesday February 1, President Putin spoke on the situation in Ukraine for the first time since December. During a news conference with Prime Minister Viktor Orban of Hungary, Putin stated that the United States was trying to pull Russia into an armed conflict. He said that the West must satisfy Russia's demands for a sphere of influence in Eastern Europe and assurances that Ukraine will never be admitted to NATO. He said that as of yet, "the principal Russian concerns turned out to be ignored." Putin went on to say that in order to prevent the situation from getting worse, Russia's interests must be taken into account.

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## Myanmar and ASEAN

The conflict between the military junta and organized armed civilians, otherwise known as the People's Defense Force (PDF), has descended into a civil war. The PDF came together after the coup in February 2021 as a grassroots resistance movement, but it has since become more organized and prepared for battle. Armed clashes between military forces and PDF members have claimed the majority of lives lost since the coup, and in recent weeks deaths from bombings, explosive devices, and landmines have increased. The conflict monitoring group Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) estimates 12,000 people have been killed since the coup started. The military has the advantage of aerial firepower and can obtain weapons from supportive governments in Russia and China. An open-source investigation reported that Russian armored vehicles were unloaded in Yangon a few weeks ago. Meanwhile, the PDF have concentrated on targeting police stations and small military outposts. They have seized weapons and bombed military-owned businesses.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has decided to exclude the military-appointed foreign minister Wunna Maung Lwin from an ASEAN meeting happening later in February. There is however not a complete consensus within ASEAN about how to engage the military junta. Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen went to visit the Burmese military leader Min Aung Hlaing in early January, an action some took to be an endorsement.

In the United States, the Biden administration continues to condemn the outrages unfolding in Myanmar, and claims to be working alongside ASEAN to cease the violence and restore democracy. In a joint statement released by the U.S. State Department, the European Union, and various foreign ministers, the military regime was called upon to return Myanmar to a democratic process and to stop all human rights violations carried out against the people of Myanmar.

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## Quad Alliance

In late November, several months after the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, known as the "Quad," met for their first in-person leaders' summit in Washington, President Xi Jinping of China made a statement that his country would not seek dominance over the South China sea. He was quoted saying, "China resolutely opposes hegemonism and power politics, wishes to maintain friendly relations with its neighbors and jointly nurture lasting peace in the region and absolutely will not seek hegemony or even less, bully the small." In response to President Xi's statement, Australian defense minister Peter Dutton said that China's actions do not match its rhetoric. Defense minister Dutton was referring specifically to a Chinese navy ship that was tracked sailing through Australia's exclusive economic zone, a violation of the nation's sovereignty. In a speech in Canberra, Dutton said, "We're all familiar with the frequent claims of the Chinese government that it is committed to peace, cooperation, and development, and yet we bear witness to a signifi-

cant disconnect between the words and the actions. We've watched very closely as the Chinese government has engaged in increasingly alarming activities." Secretary Blinken also criticized China's "aggressive actions" throughout Asia, expressing support for the Quad as a bulwark against Chinese aggression.

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## Drug Policy in Latin America

Drug cartels continue to hold sway in Latin America, specifically in Mexico. By late 2021, 25,000 individuals had been killed in Mexico due to cartel violence, official figures showed. During his first year in office, President Biden has not pushed back too much against the punitive drug laws Latin American countries have enforced for decades. However, given the debate over the efficacy of strict drug laws, the Biden administration has introduced some changes in drug policy outlined in the White House's office of Drug Control Policy (ONDCP), which "ensure that activities to curb the production and trafficking of illicit drugs adhere to the rule of law and respect human rights."

In addition, the United States established new agreements with the governments of Colombia and Mexico this past year. In October, Washington released a new U.S.-Colombia Counternarcotics Strategy founded on three pillars: drug supply reduction, comprehensive rural security and development, and environmental protection. The first pillar, drug supply reduction links eradication, laboratory destruction, and anti-money laundering efforts; the second pillar includes robust investment in rural development; and the third pillar is focused on countering crimes that have a negative environmental impact, such as coca cultivation.

In October, the United States released a joint statement with the Mexican government focused on facing security challenges together. Both nations pledge to invest in public health to counter the impacts of drug use, prevent transborder crime by securing travel and arms trafficking, and to pursue criminal networks by stopping illicit financiers and strengthening justice sectors. Both of these initiatives will guide how the United States works with Colombia and Mexico going forward to prevent drug related violence.

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## Biden’s Agenda

President Biden’s first year in office was characterized by restoring pre-Trump era foreign policy. Unlike President Trump, who strained ties with U.S. allies and raised tensions with adversaries such as Iran and Venezuela, Biden has sought to restore multilateral order and bring the United States back into close relations with its allies. These goals can be characterized in the Biden administration’s early decisions to rejoin the Paris Climate Accords and the World Health Organization. Despite his ambitious start, Biden’s first year in office has been characterized by some difficult foreign policy dilemmas. Most notably, the withdrawal from Afghanistan has brought on a lot of criticism toward president Biden, especially due to the lack of coordination with NATO allies stationed there. The other two major foreign policy dilemmas that have cropped up this past year are related to relations with China and Russia. Biden set out wanting to stabilize relations with these two countries, looking for avenues to cooperation. The reality of the past year has been the opposite.

U.S.-Chinese relations hit a new low this past year regarding the status of Taiwan. President Xi has made reunification with Taiwan a goal, and in 2021 a new act of aggression was reported when

China sent military aircraft into Taiwan’s air defense zone. In response, the Biden administration has begun to show more-public support for Taiwan. Biden raised the issue of Taiwan with President Xi during a phone conversation, and Secretary Blinken has urged foreign presidents to maintain formal diplomatic ties with Taiwan. The question of Taiwanese sovereignty, has continued to stoke the ongoing hostility between the United States and China.

U.S.-Russian relations have also been challenged this past year largely due to the conflict in Ukraine. Russian aggression on the eastern border of Ukraine has led the United States to increase its vocal support of Ukrainian sovereignty, and consider enforcing NATO troops in Baltic and eastern European states. These decisions have angered President Putin, leading him to demand a withdrawal of NATO troops and a promise to never admit Ukraine into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. The contentious relationship over Ukraine will continue to dictate U.S.-Russian relations into the new year.

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