



A US-JAPAN AGENDA FOR THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION

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The following is part of a post-election series on the impact of the Biden administration on US relations in the Indo-Pacific. Visit [here](#) for part one, [here](#) for part two, [here](#) for part three, and [here](#) for part four.

The Japan-US alliance is off to a good start under two new leaders. Nonetheless, there is nervousness in Tokyo regarding the bilateral relationship. Some of this is the usual—misplaced—concern about a Democratic administration, but other, more substantial issues weigh on Japanese politicians and bureaucrats. The Biden administration must address these anxieties—but more important are joint efforts to build a framework for cooperation on regional and global security concerns.

The [first phone call](#) between Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide and President-elect Joe Biden went well. They agreed to strengthen the alliance and cooperate on Covid-19 and climate change. Importantly, Biden restated his commitment to defend the Senkaku Islands. Biden's foreign policy team, which includes Tony Blinken and Jake Sullivan, is familiar to Japanese. The emphasis on rebuilding alliance relationships and the liberal international order, the

commitment to US leadership, and recognition that the number one challenge is China, is reassuring, and a welcome return to normalcy after four years of Trump's "America first" foreign policy.

Still, anxieties persist. There is a concern that Japan could be punished for the good relationship that former Prime Minister Abe Shinzo had with Trump. The Tokyo commentariat is unnerved by Biden's reference to a "[secure and prosperous](#)"—rather than "free and open"—Indo-Pacific. While the Biden foreign policy team recognizes the centrality of China to regional security, it appears to believe the US-China competition is primarily economic and technological, not military. Nominating for [secretary of defense](#) an individual who lacks understanding of China and the Indo-Pacific reinforces this perception. Finally, Biden's top priorities are domestic: dealing with the pandemic, economic recovery, and racial injustice. Observers of US politics wonder how a US president, no matter how well intentioned, can tackle two such crowded, difficult, and potentially contradictory agendas.

Biden's reference to a "secure and prosperous" Indo-Pacific sends a mixed signal. Biden understands the importance of this theater: He was a promoter of Obama's rebalance. But as Japan, Australia, India, and some European democracies adopt the language of a "free and open" Indo-Pacific (FOIP), decisionmakers and analysts here are trying to ascertain what Biden intended by rejecting that language and what his formula means. This could be the usual rebranding of foreign policy by a new administration, or it could signal something more significant. Clarification is critical, and not just because FOIP was coined by Abe.

China is central to Japanese anxieties. Japanese want continued focus on China's growing military strength. The US military acknowledges that China's improving anti-access/area-denial and power projection capabilities could constrain its freedom of action in the western Pacific. China is demonstrating its military power more aggressively to its neighbors, including Japan. Economic and technological competition is intensifying and matters for military

capability, but that must not obscure or diminish concern about China's hard power.

Japan recognizes that relations with China can't be unidimensional: there must be a mix of cooperation and competition. But Tokyo is unnerved by the prospect of US cooperation with China that could come at its expense. Biden has said that his administration will seek to cooperate with China on climate change and global health. How far will it go? What will his administration do if China attempts to bargain with Washington, exchanging, say, cooperation on climate change for a blind eye to developments in Hong Kong?

Yes, Biden has called on democracies to join his pressure campaign against Beijing. But China's immediate neighbors, including Tokyo, might hesitate to join—despite shared concern about Beijing's human rights violations and other aggressive behavior—given geographical proximity, economic dependence, and the shifting balance of power. Merely working with allies and democracies is not a China strategy. As a first step, he should strongly denounce Chinese attempts to [coerce Australia](#).

On North Korea, the Biden team indicated it would—following the model of the multilateral agreement with Iran (the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action)—seek [arms control](#) negotiations while insisting on complete, verifiable irreversible disarmament as a long-term goal. This reflects reality. Pyongyang will not give up its nuclear weapons. Nevertheless, it is a dramatic shift in policy, rendering invalid dozens of US-initiated United Nations Security Council resolutions. A focus on arms control would allow Pyongyang to keep short- and intermediate-range missile capabilities that cover Japan and South Korea even as it eliminated long-range capabilities that target the mainland United States. Washington must consult with allies and partners to ensure that their concerns are taken into account. The US should also prioritize measures to protect allies against those shorter-range missiles.

The best check on North Korea is Japan-US-ROK trilateral cooperation, but that is difficult if not impossible as [Japan-ROK relations](#) drop to historic

lows. Obama pressured Tokyo to be proactive about historical issues to mend bilateral relations, which led to the 2015 comfort women agreement; Biden is expected to do the same. But the current issue between Tokyo and Seoul is more about international law—the interpretation of the 1965 bilateral normalization agreement—not history and human rights. Biden should facilitate, not mediate, Japan-ROK talks.

The potentially largest problem for the US-Japan alliance is US domestic politics. The US political divide is stark: some 80 million people voted for Biden, while some 74 million people voted for Trump. A new administration will not bridge that gap. The [infighting within](#) the Democratic Party could constrain the new administration as well. This brutal combination—Trumpists, far-left progressives, a divided Congress, and a pressing domestic agenda—will constrain the Biden administration's foreign policy.

Hurdles need not be permanent obstacles, however. Japan and the US must modernize their alliance. Ultimately, that means Japan will play a more proactive role in national and regional security, while helping the US maintain its forward presence and ensure strategic mobility in the region even as Americans become more inward looking. To that end, an important first step is a quick resolution to host nation support talks.

That should be followed by a strategic dialogue to identify and share visions of the future regional security environment, including risk assessments, as well as roles, missions, and capabilities for the two militaries. A cornerstone of future cooperation should be economic statecraft. The two governments should coordinate on trade, technology and investment controls, with a focus on ensuring supply chain security and resilience.

Japan and the US should call for a global dialogue among democracies that includes the identification of measures to protect those governments from external coercion. It should set parameters as well for engaging China, pledging that cooperation will not come at the expense of like-minded countries' interests.

Tokyo has work to do, too. It must produce a new national security strategy. It should review defense procurement plans: It must reassess the proposal to replace the [aborted Aegis Ashore](#) system and adopt the new Aegis system the US Navy plans to introduce. It should enhance intelligence and counterintelligence capabilities by establishing a central intelligence agency with emphasis on economic intelligence, and improve cyber-defense by getting more talent. Japan should also adopt a “Magnitsky” human rights accountability act.

Both countries and both governments recognize the importance of the Japan-US alliance to their respective national interests. That is a strong foundation for continued efforts to make it stronger and more resilient.

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