



## 2021: A YEAR OF IMMENSE FRUSTRATION IN AND WITH JAPAN

BY BRAD GLOSSERMAN

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The year ahead may prove to be one of the most frustrating in recent Japanese history. Despite an evolving and uncertain strategic environment, the future could be bright: Japan has unprecedented opportunities to shape that development. Unfortunately, however, structural and attitudinal constraints may slam the door on those options. It is possible to overcome these impediments, but it's hard to have confidence that Japan will do so.

As Tokyo surveys the world beyond its shores, it should be optimistic. The Biden administration accepts and embraces core principles of Japan's own foreign policy: [multilateralism](#), institutionalism, a consultative process, and a commitment to rule of law. Most compelling, the new administration views Beijing [with suspicion](#) and is committed to multidimensional competition with China.

The Biden team sees alliances as critical to any strategy to engage China. Washington will applaud and encourage forward-leaning partners, especially given the need in the US to focus on domestic affairs (to rebuild national consensus) and reapportion burdens within security partnerships. This gives Tokyo ample space to promote and pursue its own foreign policy within an alliance framework. The end of the Trump administration will also shift the parameters of host nation support talks, which should reduce one source of tension in the relationship.

Tokyo has a reinvigorated and restructured national security bureaucracy that has enjoyed eight years of success. Japan has been [modernizing its military](#)—much more remains to be done—and promoting capacity-building among regional security forces. Resuscitation of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement on Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), completion of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership and other trade deals underscore Japan's commitment to a rules-based global economic order and its ability to support it. All this has been done in the service of a strategic approach to regional security, one articulated in the concept of a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific," and which has been adopted by the US (even if the words may change) and other regional governments.

A new appreciation for national economic statecraft gives Tokyo a chance to focus on and address emerging 21<sup>st</sup> century challenges. A new National Security Strategy, due to be published this year, provides an opportunity for bilateral cooperation and coordination as Tokyo and Washington simultaneously craft their own versions of that document. Japan should be confident as it engages the new US administration and be ready to push the partnership forward in ways that respond to its own concerns and preferences.

Japan should call for consultations as soon as Biden's Asia team is assembled, and plan for a Security Consultative Committee (SCC or "2+2") meeting by year's end. [Host-nation support talks](#) should reach a quick—even if short-term—solution so that alliance managers can consider new and creative apportionments of roles and missions to better fit current realities. Among the discussion items should be alignment of national security strategies. Integral to any talks is a candid assessment of deterrence and ways it can be strengthened. A blue-sky assessment of alliance options is in order. Given the dynamics and shifts in the regional security environment, creativity is at a premium.

That potential will likely go unrealized, however. Japan's leadership is currently weak, divided and, preoccupied with the fate of the 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games. Combined with enduring

misgivings about Democratic administrations in the US, the result will likely be inertia, if not paralysis.

An absence of strong leadership is the first problem. Any successor to Abe Shinzo would likely suffer in comparison: Abe, the longest serving leader in Japanese history, had a vision for his country and the determination to realize it. Suga Yoshihide was the consensus candidate to succeed Abe after his surprise resignation last summer, but the promise of policy continuity has been overtaken by an absence of vision and foreign policy experience. Suga took up where Abe left off, promoting the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific,” pursuing closer [security ties](#) with like-minded governments like that of Australia, as well as key Southeast Asian partners like Indonesia and Vietnam. More visible and important to voters has been the return of scandals from the Abe era, a third wave of COVID-19 infections (the most severe yet), and Suga’s uninspiring performance in addressing them.

A weakened prime minister allowed faction leaders to reassert themselves and play a larger role in policy. An internal party struggle over how to deal with China now threatens the most important pillar of Tokyo’s foreign and security policies. LDP Secretary General Nikai Toshihiro, who favors a [softer line](#) toward Beijing, is ascendant, and China hawks are retreating. A December [survey](#) of Japanese business reveals that the corporate sector too favors a softer approach toward China and would like the Biden administration to blunt the sharper edges of the Trump hard line. Insiders complain about a lack of leadership and the weakening of the Kantei when effective policy demands strong central authority to pursue a whole of government approach.

An additional distraction is the debate over the fate of the 2020 Summer Olympic and Paralympic Games, postponed from last summer because of the COVID outbreak and tentatively scheduled for this summer. Hosting the Games is a matter of [tremendous prestige](#) for the Japanese government—the public is [far less enamored](#)—and it weighs heavily on decision making in Tokyo. It will absorb considerable political capital of a government that may already be overdrawn, undermining the desire or capacity to push security policy or move forward on alliance issues. All

countries must balance public health and economic needs as they respond to the COVID outbreak but the Olympics are a thumb on the scale in Japan, and have contributed to an erosion of trust in the Japanese government.

Polls offer a grim assessment. After taking office with some of the highest approval ratings in modern Japanese history, the Cabinet [approval rating](#) plummeted 32 points to 42% by the end of the year.

The second problem is longstanding suspicion in Tokyo of Democratic administrations in Washington. While the alliance with Japan enjoys bipartisan support in the United States, Japanese instinctively feel more comfortable with Republicans. This reflex will be complemented by nostalgia for the Trump years, during which Japan had a special relationship with the US president. Abe’s status as the “Trump whisperer” meant that Japan never felt the brunt of the president’s anger. Japan had space to pursue preferred policies and US rhetoric aligned with Japanese interests. There may have been some problems, but benefits [outweighed costs](#). The departures of Trump and Abe have kindled fears that the alliance will be hobbled.

Combine a weak and divided leadership in Tokyo with suspicion of the new US administration and Japan will have little capacity or incentive for creative and entrepreneurial policy making. Instead, fearful of rejection or misinterpretation and eager to conserve precious political capital there will be an inclination to hunker down and cling to the status quo. This “shelter in place” mentality will do the alliance and Japan a disservice.

This outcome could change. A prime minister that is visionary and dynamic could alter Japan’s trajectory. Recent developments put that prospect within reach. As long as it remains a mere possibility, however, the gap between what could be and what is will widen. Frustration may be one of the better outcomes.

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