



HOW A BIDEN ADMINISTRATION COULD RESTORE US INFLUENCE IN ASIA

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The victory of Joseph Biden and Kamala Harris in the hotly contested and often unpredictable US presidential elections may have significant implications for US foreign policy, including Asia policy. But these implications should be judged against the backdrop of the impact of a still raging Covid-19 pandemic. The Biden administration faces an unprecedented opportunity, one already created by Covid-19, but which was mishandled by the Trump administration, to reshape US Asia policy and regain influence.

Before turning to the implications of the Biden victory, which will take days, weeks, and months to unfold, let's look at how the Covid-19 pandemic was already affecting Asia's strategic situation and choices. While some analysts concluded that China was gaining at the expense of the US, thanks to its ability to suppress the pandemic at home and get its economy moving faster than other large economies, Covid-19 also presents a chance for the US to regain influence in the region.

China's mask and vaccine diplomacy, in full swing in the region, did not alter the negative perceptions of China induced by its initial handling of the pandemic, its military actions, and "[wolf warrior diplomacy](#)." As Thai expert Thitinan Pongsudhirak told me in a personal email, despite China's mask and vaccine diplomacy, the region could "become more leery and wary of China's brooding influence." China is

becoming "its own enemy, lacking nuance and finesse in diplomacy."

Southeast Asia also worries about China's lack of transparency which has endangered regional public health, its military behavior in the South China Sea, and its handling of Hong Kong and Taiwan.

While China can and is acting to arrest such perceptions, with high-level visits and offers of further aid, it cannot reverse them without a significant change in its "actual" military and diplomatic behavior, including its policy towards territorial disputes.

On the other hand, the military gap between China and Southeast Asia is likely to grow. Due to the severe economic crisis induced by the pandemic, Southeast Asian nations are sure to reduce their defense spending and military modernization. Yet, this might paradoxically stoke greater fear of China in the region, already exacerbated by Beijing's military actions in the South China Sea since the Covid-19 outbreak.

And that fear would feed into China's "trust deficit" in Southeast Asia, which was already substantial before the pandemic, as [revealed](#) in a Jan 2020 survey conducted by a Singaporean think tank. In that survey, a majority of respondents—53.5%—see China as a threat to their country's interests and sovereignty, compared to 21.8% for the US, 5.0% for Japan, 3.5% for the EU, and 2.5% for India. The same survey also reveals that only 10.5% see China as a "responsible stakeholder that respects and champions international law," compared to 15.4% for the US, 31.1% for India, 51% for Japan, and 68% for the EU.

While a hedging or "not taking sides" approach remains the overt position of Southeast Asian states, and while even the larger Asian nations like India and Japan remain wary of joining the US side in an outright strategic struggle or "cold war" against China, in reality, there is also substantially increased distrust and fear of China in the region after the Covid-19 outbreak.

Hence, the pandemic's effects might have actually lessened the likelihood a "Chinese Monroe Doctrine"

(Asian states bandwagoning with Beijing) or China developing a regional sphere of influence.

This opens greater opportunity for the US and like-minded countries in the region for arresting or reversing Chinese diplomatic and economic influence they see as harmful to regional stability. For Washington and its allies, this means some critical policy adjustments are necessary. A clear lesson is to work with allies and partners who enjoy trust in the region, such as Japan, EU, ROK, Australia, New Zealand, and India. Apart from the strategic value of its alliances and partnerships, it is also critical to US credibility and moral standing in the region in the pandemic era.

China is not the only Indo-Pacific nation which has contained the pandemic: South Korea, Taiwan, Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, and Vietnam have also done an equally creditable job with greater transparency. China is not the only source of vaccines and medicine; the US, in partnership with Japan, India, Australia (fellow members of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue), and the EU, have an opportunity to step in. The Biden administration needs to work with them in developing and distributing vaccine and treatment.

Given Asia's heavy dependence on trade and globalization, the economic damage to the region from Covid-19 is especially severe, all the more so because it comes against the backdrop of Trump's trade war and the backlash against globalization in the West. The Biden administration has a golden opportunity to resume more natural market forces of mutual benefit, especially since global trade is critical to the economic revival of its allies and partners in Southeast Asia. Joining the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) would be step in the right direction.

The Biden administration should revitalize the US' participation in Asia's multilateral institutions. Since becoming president, Trump himself has attended only one collective summit with ASEAN leaders, the US-ASEAN summit in Manila in November 2017, where Trump symbolically fumbled execution of the famed ASEAN "handshake" ritual. More important was [the](#)

[failure](#) to send a cabinet-level figure to the 2019 ASEAN and East Asian Summit (EAS) in Thailand in November 2019. This was an avoidable blow to both the US and ASEAN, undercutting the painstaking and competent work of US agencies and representatives, including the State and Defense departments. The highest representative in that meeting was National Security Adviser Robert O'Brien, prompting ASEAN to limit participation at the formal US-ASEAN meeting to only three ASEAN leaders (the "troika") plus foreign ministers. Avoiding a repeat of this is important if the Biden administration is to restore the US credibility as a multilateral player, both in Asia and globally.

At the same time, and equally important, the Biden administration should immediately consider avoiding a head-on ideological confrontation with China as its main approach, as this is not likely to be the most productive way forward, or in the US and region's interests. Spearheaded by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, the US campaign portrays China as the new "evil empire" (reminiscent of former President Ronald Reagan's initial portrayal of the Soviet Union). But as the former Indonesian ambassador to the US, Dino Patti Djalal has [recently written](#), Southeast Asians do not welcome a bellicose US tone towards China. In my view, such a policy is scaring Washington's regional allies and partners more than China.

Most nations in Asia—democratic or authoritarian—look to the US to maintain the military balance, and wish it to reengage in multilateralism and help them to assist in pandemic relief and control. To do this effectively does not require an overly hostile or ideological offensive directed at China. It does require Washington to pursue a more nuanced approach, combining revitalized regional diplomatic and trade relations and development assistance, while restoring US prestige and credibility lost during the Trump years.

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