

PERSPECTIVE

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Beyond 2020: Indo-Pacific Strategy under a Democrat White House

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- A Joe Biden administration will dispense with the ‘America First’ rhetoric and will adopt a more globalist or internationalist language. However, it will adopt a far more confrontational approach to China than the Barack Obama administration had done.
- There will be more emphasis on working with Southeast Asia to shape the region and advance what the United States perceives to be common strategic, military, economic, political and global governance objectives. There will also be more emphasis on the importance of human rights and reform of domestic institutions that promote accountability and transparency.
- This means higher expectations on Southeast Asian states and ASEAN to play a more proactive and forward-leaning role to help counter Chinese policies and actions.
- If this does not eventuate, there will be more reliance on hard deterrence and enhanced interests in mechanisms such as the Quad.

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INTRODUCTION

While the United States is currently preoccupied with managing the COVID-19 crisis, balancing and countering China has become, and will remain, its highest priority after the worst of the pandemic is over. Indeed, the recent arguments as to whether it is appropriate to refer to COVID-19 as the ‘Chinese virus’ or ‘Wuhan coronavirus’ between officials from both countries only reaffirms the reality that a global health crisis will further intensify rather than alleviate competition and rivalry between the two countries.

Much has already been published on the meaning, contours and implementation of the Donald Trump administration’s Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy, and groupings and mechanisms such as the Quad.¹ Even as the FOIP and related initiatives are evolving under the current administration, attention is turning to aspects of continuity and change with respect to a possible Democrat White House under Joe Biden.

This *Perspective* offers some analysis as to what will remain the same and what will be different when it comes to the FOIP or whatever moniker a Biden presidency may employ for the Indo-Pacific region.

SOFTER RHETORIC, BUT STILL BALANCING CHINA

On 4 March 2020, the US House of Representatives unanimously (by 415-0) passed the *Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative Act*. In passing the Bill which aims to prevent Taiwan’s diplomatic allies from cutting ties with Taipei due to pressure and/or incentives from Beijing, Democratic Speaker Nancy Pelosi reaffirmed Congress’ support for a ‘free, open and democratic Taiwan’.² Months earlier, Pelosi spoke strongly of her support for the Tibet Policy Act 2019 which supports the aspirations of the Tibetan people to protect their cultural identity.³

The Democratic Party’s hardening of positions against China is not only evident in Congress. In a joint article by two Democratic Party stalwarts who are likely to be nominated for high level posts in a Biden presidency, Kurt Campbell and Jake Sullivan argue that rather than any ‘grand bargain’ (i.e., ‘G-2’), the “goal should be to establish favourable terms of co-existence with Beijing in four key competitive domains: military, economic, political and global governance...”⁴

Although the two authors, with an eye to the November 2020 presidential elections, argue that the Democratic approach will be superior to that of the current administration, the bases for the more confrontational approach adopted by Trump are left intact. For example, while both authors give their nod to coming up with better ‘crisis management’ processes to ensure stable coexistence with China, they recognise that China has long been competing with America in all the aforementioned domains and the onus is on Washington to respond more effectively, rather than deny the existence of such competition. As Sullivan (who is arguably the leading intellectual and foreign policy figure for the ‘moderate’ Democrats) argues elsewhere, external threats to American leadership, values and interests lie in “China’s long-term strategy to dominate the fastest growing part of the world, to make the global economy adjust to its brand of authoritarian capitalism, and above all to put pressure on free and open economic and political models.”⁵

Biden has gradually shifted and come around to the reality of strategic competition and rivalry with China.⁶ As Sullivan (who exercises immense influence vis-à-vis the Biden camp) puts it, none of these challenges “can be effectively confronted if the United States sits on the sidelines”⁷ and if the US does not “set the agenda, it doesn’t happen.”⁸ These sentiments are consistent with what was learned in the author’s personal interactions with many other leading Democratic figures with influence over foreign policy.

Under a Biden administration, language and style will change significantly. There will be more talk of ‘competitive coexistence’ rather than ‘rivalry’. But there will be no retreat by the establishment or moderate Democrats who agree that balancing and countering China is the primary external challenge.

Moreover, there will not be a return to the Barack Obama approach of avoiding difficult issues with China (e.g., the South China Sea) in order to seek Beijing’s cooperation on other matters (e.g., climate change.) The ‘resolve deficit’⁹ that was apparent under Obama is unlikely to recur, at least not to the same degree, under a Biden Presidency. But they are seeking to dissociate themselves from the present Administration when it comes to how America should meet the China challenge.

FOIP – BUT WITH DIFFERENCES

Even if the Democrats dispense with the FOIP moniker and the confrontational language of the *2018 National Security Strategy*, much of the Indo-Pacific Strategy will remain. The framework will still be to preserve and advance the principles of a FOIP and ‘advancing American global leadership’ which is the mission of the National Security Action,¹⁰ a network of influential former Democrats offering policies to help guide Biden.

Abe will be the regional statesman most respected by a Democrat White House, his administration will remain the greatest reservoir of regional policy wisdom, and the alliance with Japan will be the highest priority. Taiwan will increase in strategic and political importance. In the South China Sea, there will be renewed emphasis on deterring Chinese adventurism and coercion through military, economic and diplomatic means (although the Democrats will quickly discover Beijing’s high tolerance for absorbing diplomatic costs to achieve its objectives, meaning that eventually they will have to fall back on hard deterrence).

Significantly, several Democrats are tapping into recent thinking by the current administration and have argued for more reliance on asymmetric capabilities such as missiles, hypersonic weapons, unmanned vehicles and swarm weapons, even if these are at the expense of large platforms such as aircraft carriers and F-35s. This means that even if there is a recommitment to previous agreements such as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (or Iran Deal), there is unlikely to be a recommitment to the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, given a continued high interest in land-based missiles.¹¹

When it comes to foreign policy, the strongest and most consistent Democrat criticism of the current administration is the alleged ‘unilateralism’ of Trump which is encapsulated by the latter’s ‘America First’ slogan and supposed contempt for allies, partners and

cooperative approaches (especially cooperation through multilateral approaches). For Democrats, ‘America First’ is not just the approach of a uniquely unsuitable President but also a contemporary manifestation of American ‘hubris and excess’.¹²

If the Democrats were to win office, one suspects that scepticism toward multilateral approaches will not completely subside. The US as the sole superpower will remain more forward-leaning on China than any of its allies and partners. Multilateral approaches are not well suited to decisive action and the achievement of instrumental or goal-orientated objectives. A Democrat White House seeking to better balance and counter aspects of Chinese policies will find multilateral institutions and approaches an obstacle and become frustrated by the dragging of the chain. While ‘America First’ will be rejected and the rhetoric will not be as overtly hostile to multilateral institutions and approaches, there will be more reliance on unilateralism and ad hoc coalitions than current Democrat language suggests.

Even so, there will be more explicit and genuine efforts made to win allies and partners over and more consistently engage with organisations such as ASEAN at the highest levels. There will be far less talk about the ‘burdens’ of foreign bases and commitments while allies and partners will be feted rather than called to justify their reliance on American protection and resources.

Indeed, rather than asking allies and partners to answer the question ‘What’s in it for America’ as Trump has done, Biden is likely to pose the question ‘What more should the US and allies/partners do together to meet the China challenge and what does each of these allies/partners bring to the table?’ The objective is not to achieve a 1990s style pre-eminence, which the American foreign policy establishment accept is over, but to advance American leadership and entrench favourable terms for the US in the military, economic, political and global governance realms.

GOOD AND BAD NEWS FOR ASEAN AND ITS MEMBER STATES

At first glance, this will offer relief to many Southeast Asian partners and champions of ASEAN who have been bruised and blindsided by Trump’s ‘unilateralism’ and unpredictability. Prima facie, a Biden White House will be more consultative and more open to seeking regional views. In the manner of Abe, Biden will seek to position his administration as a guarantor of the preferred order and a ‘problem solver’. But it will not be a return to a pre-Trump ‘business as usual’ approach and there will be mixed blessings for those states seeking to keep out of the fray. Trump’s more unilateral approach has inadvertently allowed some states to sit on the sidelines even if they were criticised for doing so while Obama placed lighter obligations on these same states given his less confrontational approach. *Under Biden, there may well be new and/or greater burdens placed on Southeast Asian states beyond what they have endured under the Trump and Obama administrations.* In other words, part of the Biden administration’s renewed emphasis on Southeast Asia is the expectation that these smaller countries ‘step up’.

Consider Democrat arguments that the US will need to diversify and expand its military presence throughout Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean to create more points of pressure and complicate the strategic and tactical environment for Beijing. Unlike the Trump

administration which has relied mainly on Japan and Australia to achieve this, a Biden White House is likely to call upon Southeast Asian allies and partners to take a more accommodating and proactive approach to hosting American assets or contributing to the security burden – the latter being a conversation pushed by Trump and that will be continued by Democrats. Democrats are already speaking about expanding access agreements without the need for costly and protracted basing rights in the region.¹³ Sullivan recommends the US increasing naval operations in the South China Sea and “getting its partners to do the same,”¹⁴ which is something Southeast Asians have been reluctant to do. In the future, American expectations might even include regional countries hosting ‘game changing’ capabilities such as land-based missiles. Although a matter of pure speculation for the time being, should the military balance in the South China Sea continue to change significantly, Southeast Asian states may be asked to consider accepting this security burden.

Similarly, there is consensus amongst Democrats that America suffers an economic ‘structural imbalance’ with China, that Beijing illegitimately games the international economic system through IP theft and forced transfers of technology, subsidies etc., and China views geo-economics as a primary arena of competition.¹⁵ In enlisting one’s allies, partners and friends, it is likely a Democrat administration will seek more collective economic and diplomatic action to dissuade or mitigate Chinese economic behaviour in this context. This might include renewed interest in the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (given the Democrat criticism that the FOIP lacks an economic dimension and the Trans-Pacific Partnership being an Obama initiative,) which would be welcomed by many regional states. It would also mean more thought given to how military, economic and diplomatic resources and tools can be better integrated to achieve national security objectives vis-à-vis China.¹⁶

Less comfortable would be a Democrat administration’s greater emphasis in urging Southeast Asian states to abandon a neutral view on some of the more predatory and/or opaque aspects of Chinese economic practices, for example, within the Belt and Road Initiative framework. Democrats might well insist that ASEAN states become a more active part of institutional ‘solutions.’ A Democrat White House will not remain silent or indifferent to ‘corrupt’ and ‘insider’ deals between China and Southeast Asian governing elites.

This might extend to areas such as 5G where Huawei already has a strong presence in the region. Currently, urgings by the Trump administration in relation to Huawei and 5-G have been robust but piecemeal and done largely on a bilateral basis with allies at the higher levels. Democrats, who share Trump’s suspicions about Huawei, might well be less tolerant of ASEAN and individual countries continuing to take an agnostic view of this issue. Indeed, Democrats have criticised the current administration for failing to ‘coordinate with allies and partners in advance’.¹⁷

With respect to ASEAN, Biden will certainly be more engaged personally than Trump has been. The Democrats seek collective responses under American leadership to threats and challenges to the US and the broader system. In this sense, a Democrat White House will seek to implement its agenda and strategy through ASEAN rather than apart from it.

Despite Democrats using a more soothing diplomacy, a Biden presidency will not look kindly on an ASEAN agenda which emphasises inclusiveness and neutrality whilst

providing China with diplomatic cover to pursue its objectives at the expense of America's. But rather than ignore or downplay ASEAN, Biden might well increase the pressure on ASEAN and member states to take a stronger stance on certain issues. As part of a renewed focus by Democrats on 'diplomatic and economic tools', this includes pressuring ASEAN and member states behind closed doors to commit to standards and processes when it comes to infrastructure building and digital connectivity which are more consistent with FOIP principles and offer more resistance to undesirable aspects of the BRI. Senior officials and regional embassies would be given authority, resources and instructions to be more proactive with respect to issues that involve China pushing its weight around such as in the Mekong region. Importantly, a Biden presidency would not tolerate ASEAN or certain individual states cherry-picking standards or projects that suit them with little regard for the broader geo-strategic and geo-economic implications.

If Washington fails to move the ASEAN dial in these contexts, then there is likely to be a deemphasis on ASEAN and intensification of focus on like-minded Southeast Asian countries and on entities like the Quad. Indeed, Democrats prefer institutional responses and the desire to further institutionalise and expand the role of the QUAD would grow.

(a) The weaponization of democracy promotion and liberal values

Even though Democrats would not endorse the term 'weaponisation' of values, it is nevertheless the case that there is an enduring focus on political values within the Democrat foreign policy establishment and many of the strongest advocates on human rights vis-à-vis China come from the Democrat side. While Trump has not greatly emphasised values with respect to China and regional policy (even if senior figures such as Mike Pence and Mike Pompeo tend to do so,) Biden has frequently done so.¹⁸ This includes restoring 'America's moral leadership' through a 'global summit for democracy'.¹⁹

It is also this author's strong impression that democracy promotion and liberal values will figure prominently in any mainstream Democrat Indo-Pacific approach while the democratic aspect of the Quad membership will become a significant factor for the Biden administration. Democrats also note that 'democracy' is written in the ASEAN Charter and will likely be more vocal about abuses committed in Southeast Asian states.

Beyond rhetoric, a more robust democracy promotion agenda is more likely to be part of any Indo-Pacific strategy than is currently the case with the Trump administration, even if senior leaders such as Pence and Pompeo have spoken strongly for these principles.

CONCLUSION

Many Southeast Asians remember fondly the second term of the George W. Bush administration, which refocused on quietly building alliances and partnerships after the distraction of the War on Terror, and even the Obama years when America was predictable and non-threatening even if somewhat ineffective in strategic terms. Whatever the result in November 2020, those days are gone.

The COVID-19 pandemic will eventually fade as a dominant issue. There will be a period of economic rebuilding based on the economic fall-out of the pandemic. That will only

create further complications between the two largest economies. Whatever emerges after COVID-19 and the November elections, US-China competition and rivalry will increasingly shape and influence regional interaction.

¹ See David Arase, “Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy Outlook,” *Trends in Southeast Asia No. 12*, 2019; See John Lee, “The ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific’ and Implications for ASEAN,” *Trends in Southeast Asia, TRS13/18*, (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2018),

https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/TRS13_18.pdf; Lavina Lee, “Democracy Promotion: ANZUS and the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy,” *United States Studies Centre Report*, July 2019, <https://united-states-studies-centre.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/eec/b13/eff/eecb13effb98c93ed9fa809e2c1b9dac3c1087c2/Democracy-promotion-ANZUS-and-the-Free-and-Open-Indo-Pacific-strategy.pdf>

² See Keoni Everington, “Pelosi says ‘America stands with Taiwan’ after Taipei Act passes,” *Taiwan News*, 5 March 2020, <https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/en/news/3890304>

³ See Pelosi Floor Speech in Support of the Tibet Policy Act of 2019, 28 January 2020, <https://www.speaker.gov/newsroom/12820-0>

⁴ Kurt Campbell and Jake Sullivan, “Competition Without Catastrophe: How America Can Both Challenge and Coexist With China,” *Foreign Affairs* 98:5 2019, pp. 96-110 at 100.

⁵ Jake Sullivan, “Yes, America Can Still Lead the World,” *The Atlantic*, Jan/Feb 2019, pp. 77-85 at 80.

⁶ Compare Biden’s comments in May 2019 to those in December 1919. See Emily Birnbaum, “2020 hopeful Tim Ryan knocks Biden’s comments on China: ‘Stunningly out of touch’,” *The Hill*, 5 May 2019, <https://thehill.com/homenews/campaign/442160-2020-hopeful-tim-ryan-knocks-bidens-comments-on-china-stunningly-out-of>; Tim Hains, “Biden Says It Is Time To Stand Up To China: ‘This Is As Far As You Go,’” *RealClearPolitics.com*, 19 December 2019, https://www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2019/12/19/biden_says_it_is_time_to_stand_up_to_china_this_is_as_far_as_you_go.html

⁷ Jake Sullivan, “Yes, America Can Still Lead the World,” at 80.

⁸ Jake Sullivan, “Yes, America Can Still Lead the World,” at 82.

⁹ See David Santoro and John K. Warden, “Assuring Japan and South Korea in the Second Nuclear Age,” *Washington Quarterly* 38:1 2015, pp. 147-55.

¹⁰ <https://nationalsecurityaction.org/>

¹¹ See John Lee, “Trump was Right to Pull out of Arms Treaty, but Not Because of Russia,” *CNN.com*, 22 October 2018, <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/10/22/opinions/trump-nuclear-treaty-china-intl/index.html>

¹² Jake Sullivan, “Yes, America Can Still Lead the World,” at 78.

¹³ For example, see Kurt Campbell and Jake Sullivan, “Competition Without Catastrophe: How America Can Both Challenge and Coexist With China,” at 101-2.

¹⁴ Jake Sullivan, “Yes, America Can Still Lead the World,” at 83.

¹⁵ Kurt Campbell and Jake Sullivan, “Competition Without Catastrophe: How America Can Both Challenge and Coexist With China.”

¹⁶ See Brett Rosenberg and Jake Sullivan, “The Case for a National Security Budget,” *Foreign Affairs*, 19 November 2019, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2019-11-19/case-national-security-budget>

¹⁷ See Kurt Campbell and Jake Sullivan, “Competition Without Catastrophe: How America Can Both Challenge and Coexist With China.”

¹⁸ For example, see Biden’s Twitter feed on 4 June 2019, <https://twitter.com/joebiden/status/1135982349424963585?lang=en>

¹⁹ <https://joebiden.com/americanleadership/>

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