



TRENDS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

THE FREE AND OPEN INDO-PACIFIC BEYOND 2020

**Similarities and
Differences between the
Trump Administration and
a Democrat White House**

John Lee

ISEAS
YUSOF ISHAK
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FOREWORD

The economic, political, strategic and cultural dynamism in Southeast Asia has gained added relevance in recent years with the spectacular rise of giant economies in East and South Asia. This has drawn greater attention to the region and to the enhanced role it now plays in international relations and global economics.

The sustained effort made by Southeast Asian nations since 1967 towards a peaceful and gradual integration of their economies has had indubitable success, and perhaps as a consequence of this, most of these countries are undergoing deep political and social changes domestically and are constructing innovative solutions to meet new international challenges. Big Power tensions continue to be played out in the neighbourhood despite the tradition of neutrality exercised by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

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The Free and Open Indo-Pacific Beyond 2020: Similarities and Differences between the Trump Administration and a Democrat White House

By John Lee

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- American Indo-Pacific policy will be driven by its China policy, regardless of whether there is a second-term Donald Trump administration or a first-term Joe Biden administration.
- The Republicans will continue to frame the major challenge as “balancing” against Chinese power and “countering” the worst aspects of Beijing’s policies. Establishment or moderate Democrats under Biden will choose the softer language of seeking a favourable “competitive coexistence” in the military, economic, political and global governance realms, and the reassertion of American leadership and moral standing.
- In advancing the FOIP, the current administration argues that disruptiveness and unpredictability are necessary to reverse what they see as the “normalization” of Chinese assertiveness, coercion and revisionism. They also point to the closeness of US cooperation with Japan, Australia and India and burgeoning strategic relationships with Vietnam. A second-term Trump administration will continue to seek out “fit-for-purpose” existing institutions and relationships, or prioritize new ones.
- Establishment Democrats believe that the “America First” unilateralist approach is unsettling for allies and partners. In advancing a favourable “competitive coexistence” with China, Democrats will seek to expand the tools of statecraft and achieve

a better balance between military/economic/political/governance approaches.

- Prima facie, a Biden administration might position America as a more consultative guarantor of a preferred order. However, there will be greater pressure on Southeast Asians to accept more collective responsibility to advance common objectives. This means hedging in a manner more suitable to American rather than Chinese preferences. Failing that, more emphasis might be placed on greater institutionalization of the Quad and ad hoc groupings.
- A Bernie Sanders administration, now an unlikely prospect, would be a disaster for US standing and power in the region, and therefore for Southeast Asia.

The Free and Open Indo-Pacific Beyond 2020: Similarities and Differences between the Trump Administration and a Democrat White House

By John Lee¹

INTRODUCTION

Towards the end of the previous decade, the term “Trump Derangement Syndrome” (TDS) became part of common parlance in American opinion pages. For supporters of Donald Trump, the term refers to a tendency by progressive elites and media organizations to view everything the President does as destructive to American leadership and institutions because these elites and organizations have never come to terms with the victory of Donald Trump over Hilary Clinton in the 2017 presidential elections. For detractors of the President, TDS represents an outrageous coinage by Trump’s supporters to deflect what are legitimate and serious charges against the President’s exercise of his powers.

The temptation to treat the Trump’s administration’s policies as being irretrievably tied to the character and whims of America’s historically most unconventional commander-in-chief is strong, the embedded implication being that a different President in the White House will lead to a very different suite of external policies.

¹ Dr John Lee is a non-resident senior fellow at the Hudson Institute and United States Studies Centre at the University of Sydney where he is an adjunct professor. From 2016 to 2018, he served as senior national security adviser to the Australian Foreign Minister and lead ministerial adviser on the 2017 Australian Foreign Policy White Paper.

However, allowing TDS to define what American approaches to regional policy might look like over the next four years—with or in the absence of a change of administration—would be a mistake. To be sure, every President has their own idiosyncrasies, the current one more than others, while every administration has their own approach. But overemphasis on the uniqueness of Trump is the wrong place to begin. Some aspects of his presidency might well be an aberration but many more are not, either because the current administration represents an evolution or synthesis in pre-existing thinking or else because Trump has deeply changed the policy dial on many issues. Getting the balance of factors and mindsets right is crucial when it comes to understanding the future of frameworks such as the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) and the grouping of the United States, Japan, India and Australia known as the Quad.

This article does not attempt to predict specific policies that a second-term Trump administration or a first-term Democrat one will pursue. Specific policies are mostly shaped by empirical events and by the responses of senior individuals in the administration. Especially in the case of a possible Democrat White House, it is impossible to know these factors ahead of time.

It is a more useful and feasible exercise to draw out what is unique to President Trump and his administration, and what mindsets and approaches will be different if there is a Democrat White House in 2021—as these pertain to the FOIP, Quad and general Southeast Asian policy.

Bear in mind that the key to understanding American policy in the future under Trump or else a Democrat president, is China. The change in the US over the past few years has been remarkable. The author has been associated with the Hudson Institute in Washington, DC since the first decade of this century when George W. Bush was in power. Until recently, threats and challenges such as Russia, the Middle East and terrorism competed with the growing competition with China for attention and resources.

That balance has shifted dramatically. Perhaps the greatest mistake of Xi Jinping's more assertive and seemingly more confident foreign policy approach over the past few years has been in waking up a slumbering

and somewhat complacent American giant. Except for specific threats such as North Korea's illegal nuclear and missile programmes, the Trump administration's focus on the region is largely about China—about balancing and countering Beijing's policies and actions, to be more specific.

The point is that the key to American regional policy, including the FOIP and Quad and as these relate to Southeast Asia, will predominantly be driven by its China policy. This is not to deny that America has important bilateral relationships with countries such as the Philippines and Singapore. But its China policy will remain the determining and decisive factor regardless of what happens in the November 2020 elections for the White House.

This article looks at the profound and enduring shifts in mindset and perspectives vis-à-vis China that have been adopted and championed by the Trump administration, and which are broadly supported by the Democratic Party and its policy community. These mindsets and perspectives inform the operationalization of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific and approaches to groupings such as the Quad.

The article then looks at aspects of continuity and change which would occur if a Democrat were to occupy the White House from 2021 onward.

THE FADING OF “CHIMERICA”

On 4 October 2018, US Vice President Mike Pence delivered a speech at the Hudson Institute think-tank in Washington, DC.² In unusually pointed remarks, Pence laid out a comprehensive list of complaints about Chinese behaviour. According to the Vice President, “Beijing is employing a whole-of-government approach, using political, economic

² “Vice President Pence’s remarks on the administration’s policy toward China”, Hudson Institute, Washington, DC, 4 October 2018, <https://www.hudson.org/events/1610-vice-president-mike-pence-s-remarks-on-the-administration-s-policy-towards-china102018>

and military tools, as well as propaganda, to advance its influence” at the expense of the US and international order.

The charge sheet was extensive. While previous administrations, the Vice President continued, gave “Beijing open access to [the American] economy and brought China into the World Trade Organization” (WTO) in the hope that political freedom and economic liberalization would advance, that “hope has gone unfulfilled . . . and Deng Xiaoping’s famous policy [of reform and opening] now rings hollow.”

In addition to directly challenging America strategically, and undermining the American role in upholding the international rules-based order that has been cobbled together since the end of the Second World War, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) “has also used an arsenal of policies inconsistent with free and fair trade . . . to build Beijing’s manufacturing base, at the expense of competitors—especially America.” This includes tariffs, quotas, currency manipulation, forced technology transfer, intellectual property (IP) theft and industrial subsidies—the extent of which has been well documented—occurring at a scale unmatched by any post-war economy and constitutes a violation of WTO and other treaties.³ Such “wholesale theft of American technology” is especially grievous, as it is being used by Beijing, according to Pence, to turn “ploughshares into swords on a massive scale”.

³ See “Testimony of Professor Jennifer Hillman before the US–China Economic and Review Security Commission”, 8 June 2018, <https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Hillman%20Testimony%20US%20China%20Comm%20w%20Appendix%20A.pdf>; “Derek Scissors: Testimony before the Senate Committee on Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Policy”, 11 December 2013, <http://www.aei.org/publication/the-importance-of-chinese-subsidies/>; Lilly Fang, Chaopeng Wu, Josh Lerner, and Qi Zhang, *Corruption, Government Subsidies, and Innovation: Evidence from China*, Working Paper 19-031, Harvard Business School, 2018, https://www.hbs.edu/faculty/Publication%20Files/19-031_e00c9459-f8a5-462b-8527-60f816aefe4c.pdf; James McGregor, *China’s Drive for “Indigenous Innovation”: A Web of Industrial Policies*, US Chamber of Commerce, Washington DC, 2010, https://www.uschamber.com/sites/default/files/documents/files/100728chinareport_0_0.pdf; Usha C.V. Haley, George T. Haley, “The Hidden Advantage of Chinese Subsidies”, *World Financial Review*, September–October 2014, pp. 74–77, <https://www>.

Moreover, China is misusing its economic size and weight in the form of “debt diplomacy” to extend ill-gotten leverage over smaller countries and to “exert influence and interfere in the domestic policy and politics of [the US]”. In a scathing assessment, Pence argued that “previous administrations all but ignored China’s actions—and in many cases, they abetted them.” Then he offered the main point of the speech, which was to declare: “*But those days are over.*”

While the individual complaints made against China were not new, no senior member of any administration has ever delivered such blunt remarks focused so exclusively on China’s wrongdoings and its unique and unprecedented challenge to America interests and international order. The speech went further than any other in naming China as a comprehensive competitor and rival prepared to integrate military, economic, technological and political weapons to undermine American strength, prosperity, resilience and capabilities.

Nor were Pence’s remarks the isolated words of a Vice President letting off steam. The tone and content of Pence’s speech are consistent with the *2017 National Security Strategy*⁴ and *2018 National Defense Strategy*⁵ released by the administration. Those two documents represent the considered view of the agencies and departments responsible for American foreign, security and intelligence assessments and policy. In short, Pence’s speech was merely the sharpest arrow in the American messaging quiver.

researchgate.net/profile/Usha_Haley2/publication/266327157_The_Hidden_Advantage_of_Chinese_Subsidies/links/542d2ff10cf27e39fa941e68/The-Hidden-Advantage-of-Chinese-Subsidies.pdf; Keith Bradsher, “Ford’s Signal to Auto World: Here Comes China”, *New York Times*, 21 June 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/21/business/ford-china-export-focus-mexico.html>

⁴ The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States*, December 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>

⁵ See *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military’s Competitive Edge*, 19 January 2018, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>

It is important to draw out the assumptions and shifts which spring from the above mindsets—and which have broad support amongst many Democrat candidates and the Party’s policy establishment. (Differences between Trump Republicans and Democrats will be addressed later in the report.)

First, there is now growing acceptance that China might well be beyond shaping in terms of Beijing’s strategic, political and economic objectives, but that it can and ought to be countered or resisted. Pence’s speech merely confirmed a departure from the approach of the eight previous administrations dating back to 1969. The Trump administration is not necessarily deterministic in concluding that China’s internal and external behaviour can never be shaped or altered, but is pointing to considerable evidence to make the case that China is moving in a direction opposite to political and economic liberalization. In other words, China is not simply “free-riding” and resisting becoming a “responsible stakeholder” in the international system, it is actively undermining the American-led international order that enabled China’s rise, and actively challenging American leadership and capabilities.

This is not a perspective unique to Republicans. In early 2018, two former senior Obama administration officials penned an article in *Foreign Affairs*.⁶ These authors continue to remain highly influential amongst the Democrat establishment. They argued that America had demonstrated “an outsize sense of its ability to determine China’s course”. That sense was based on “the assumption that deepening commercial, diplomatic and culture ties would transform China’s internal development and external behaviour”. This had been Washington’s broad approach since the Richard Nixon era, and has largely failed.

Second, the Trump administration is the first in recent times to bluntly question the benefits of globalization, of lowering economic barriers between major economies and multilateral institutions and of regimes such as the WTO and the United Nations. This questioning stems from reduced faith in the liberal-institutionalist notion that the more

⁶ Kurt M. Campbell and Ely Ratner, “The China Reckoning: How Beijing Defied American Expectations”, *Foreign Affairs*, March–April 2018, pp. 60–70.

interdependent nations become vis-à-vis the US and each other, the more their values and practices would align with the interests of Washington. Chinese policies and practices have contributed significantly towards reducing the willingness to allow the liberal-institutionalist approach to proceed on autopilot than any other factor.

To be sure, many of the Trump administration's policies have not been supported by Democrats in this context. Disagreements include Trump's brutal "stocktake" of the value of multilateral arrangements, and existing treaties and agreements such as the WTO, the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (Iran Deal), and the 2016 Paris Agreement on Climate Change. Trump's questioning of the effectiveness of the liberal-institutionalist creed, as described above, is further in front than Democrats are prepared to accept or concede.

Even so, there is bipartisan acceptance that globalization and increased interdependence between nations and economies (in the form of international investment and trade, the movement of people and capital over national borders and other cross-border transactions) are not simply functional phenomena with neutral or strategically indifferent outcomes which can be left alone to run its course. If the US is to continue using its standing and resources to underpin and support these processes, the bipartisan argument is that globalization and interdependence must "work for America".

As mentioned, it is China and its economic practices that have caused Republicans and Democrats to take a more critical view of unfettered globalization and interdependence. It is significant that most Democrats recognize that the report released by the Office of the US Trade Representative in March 2018⁷ (and updated in November 2018)⁸

⁷ Office of the US Trade Representative, *Findings of the Investigation into China's Acts, Policies, and Practices Related to Technology Transfer, Intellectual Property, and Innovation under Section 301 of the Trade Act of 1974*, 22 March 2018, <https://ustr.gov/sites/default/files/Section%20301%20FINAL.PDF>

⁸ Office of the US Trade Representative, *Update Concerning China's Acts, Policies, and Practices Related to Technology Transfer, Intellectual Property, and Innovation*, 20 November 2018, <https://ustr.gov/sites/default/files/enforcement/301Investigations/301%20Report%20Update.pdf>

raises genuine issues that give rise to complaints about Chinese trade and economic practices. There is broad consensus, based on considerable evidence, that Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative and industrial blueprints such as Made in China 2025 are economic policies with profound strategic and political implications.⁹ They represent China's determination to entrench dominance over the US, create a Sinocentric economic and strategic order, and reduce American power and relevance in Eurasia and the Indo-Pacific.

Indeed, Senate minority leader Charles Schumer praised Trump's decision to place tariffs on China¹⁰ and joined with other Democrat Senators to urge the President to "stand firm against China if meaningful concessions [were] not made" prior to the Trump-Xi meeting in November 2018.¹¹ Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders, who hail from the left of the party, hold similar views. The former believes that China has "weaponized its economy" and is "using its economic might to bludgeon its way onto the world stage",¹² while the latter supports the effort to "combat forces of global oligarchy and authoritarianism".¹³

⁹ See John Lee, *Ambition and Overreach: Countering the Belt and Road Initiative and Beijing's Plans to Dominate Global Innovation* (Washington, DC: Hudson Institute, February 2020), https://s3.amazonaws.com/media.hudson.org/John%20Lee_Ambition%20and%20Overreach%20-%20Countering%20One%20Belt%20One%20Road%20and%20Beijings%20Plans%20to%20Dominate%20Global%20Innovation.pdf

¹⁰ See Luis Sanchez, "Schumer Praises Trump for China Tariffs", *The Hill*, 17 June 2018, <https://thehill.com/policy/international/392636-schumer-on-china-tariffs-china-needs-us-more-than-we-need-them>

¹¹ Quoted in Sean Higgins, "Senate Democrats Urge Trump Not to Back Off China in Meeting with Xi Jinping", *Washington Examiner*, 28 November 2018, <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/policy/economy/senate-democrats-urge-trump-not-to-back-off-china-in-meeting-with-xi-jinping>

¹² Elizabeth Warren, "A Foreign Policy for All", *Foreign Affairs*, 29 November 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2018-11-29/foreign-policy-all>

¹³ Bernie Sanders, "Saunders Speech at SAIS: Building a Global Democratic Movement to Counter Authoritarianism", 9 October 2018, <https://www.sanders.senate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/sanders-speech-at-sais-building-a-global-democratic-movement-to-counter-authoritarianism>

As one Trump administration source put it, the hardening stance against China “should not be painted as mere America First-ism ... This is an overdue response that’s basically a consensus view of security people in Washington on both sides.”¹⁴

Most broadly, both major Parties—as well as stakeholders and American citizens—have hardened against China. Experts disagree as to whether the profound American turn against China can be attributed to Xi Jinping’s overreach or to Communist Party convictions and policies that preceded Xi. In any event, China has stirred deep feelings in the US, and there is no turning back.

TRUMP ADMINISTRATION: COUNTERING CHINA WITH THE FOIP

The FOIP is essentially a more muscular and proactive version of the liberal rules-based order which has been in place since after the Second World War.¹⁵

In offering a modern articulation, the FOIP seeks to support free societies within the Indo-Pacific, defined as those which protect democratic values and institutions, practise transparent and accountable governance, and respect the principles contained in the UN Charter and the Universal declaration of Human Rights. “Free” is also linked to the right of nations to be free from “coercion” when exercising their sovereign and legal rights.

The “open” aspect of the term advocates “fair and reciprocal” trade. This formulation is largely aimed at China and refers to open investment environments, protection of intellectual property, transparency of inter-

¹⁴ Quoted in Josh Rogin, “Trump’s National Security Strategy Marks a Hawkish Turn on China”, *Washington Post*, 18 December 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/josh-rogin/wp/2017/12/18/trumps-national-security-strategy-marks-a-hawkish-turn-on-china/?utm_term=.531bb546e4c9

¹⁵ See John Lee, *The “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” and Implications for ASEAN*, Trends in Southeast Asia, no. 13/2018 (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2018), https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/TRS13_18.pdf

state agreements on investment and trade, and (in a nod to ASEAN), improved connectivity in the region. In security terms, “openness” also refers to the right of states to enjoy unfettered access to the seas and airways as allowed by international law and the insistence that maritime disputes be resolved peacefully and in accordance with international laws and conventions.¹⁶

As with all such broad concepts, details and execution are all important. Given the long-standing and institutional presence and role of the US in strategic, economic, political and diplomatic terms, there is always an element about which Washington’s activities in the region are on autopilot and a continuation of decades-old policies.

However, there are different and noteworthy elements with respect to this administration which will continue into a second term if Trump is returned to office in November 2020. Rather than listing all the discernible initiatives pursued under the FOIP concept or done in the name of advancing a FOIP, it is more instructive to draw out the underlying approaches and attitudes that inform these approaches, how they differ from previous administrations, and what might change under a Democrat administration.

(a) Preparing the American Population for Competition and Rivalry

As argued above, the October 2018 remarks by Vice President Pence was not a rash and isolated speech. Since then, senior members of the administration have reaffirmed that comprehensive competition and rivalry between the US and China are an enduring reality of the international system. For example, Pence doubled down on his October

¹⁶ See 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>

remarks in a speech delivered one year later in October 2019. In these remarks, the Vice President stated:¹⁷

One year ago this month, I spoke about many of Beijing’s policies most harmful to America’s interests and values, from China’s debt diplomacy and military expansionism; its repression of people of faith; construction of a surveillance state; and, of course, to China’s arsenal of policies inconsistent with free and fair trade, including tariffs, quotas, currency manipulation, forced technology transfer, and industrial subsidies.

Past administrations have come and gone, and all were aware of these abuses. None were willing to upset the established Washington interests who not only permitted these abuses, but often profited from them. The political establishment was not only silent in the face of China’s economic aggression and human rights abuses, but they often enabled them...

[In] less than three years, President Donald Trump has changed that narrative forever. No longer will America and its leaders hope that economic engagement alone will transform Communist China’s authoritarian state into a free and open society that respects private property, the rule of law, and international rules of commerce ... Instead, as the President’s 2017 National Security Strategy articulated, the United States now recognizes China as a strategic and economic rival ...

Similar remarks have been made by other senior figures such as Secretary of State Mike Pompeo¹⁸ who devoted an entire speech to the “China

¹⁷ Remarks by Vice President Pence at the Frederic V. Malek Memorial Lecture, 24 October 2019, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-vice-president-pence-frederic-v-malek-memorial-lecture/>

¹⁸ Secretary of State Mike Pompeo’s Remarks at the 2019 Herman Kahn Award on the China Challenge, 31 October 2019, https://s3.amazonaws.com/media.hudson.org/Transcript_Secretary%20Mike%20Pompeo%20Hudson%20Award%20Remarks.pdf

Challenge” and who reportedly referred to a Communist Party-ruled China as the “central threat of our time”.¹⁹

While Trump has been more restrained and selective in his criticisms of China in focusing primarily on the latter’s economic practices, one should not underestimate the extent to which coming up with coherent and effective policies in the competition and rivalry with China is the driving force for this administration. This author identified a remarkable consistency of focus when discussing policy with senior administration figures across the defence, diplomatic and economic arms of government: challenging, countering and defeating those aspects of Chinese policy which threatened American interests were foremost in terms of informing the mindset, frameworks and policies of the administration.

Public pronouncements are also seen as essential for changing the public narrative from the previous one of optimism about Beijing emerging as a “responsible stakeholder” to one about America engaging in earnest competition and rivalry with China. The early driver for preparing the American people and stakeholders for this reality was the deepening trade and economic war between the two countries and the subsequent need to offer some justification for the economic disruption (and potential costs) that would occur. There was fertile ground for this, given the growing criticism by American industry groups and firms about Chinese economic policies and practices.²⁰ Since then, the public conversation conducted by officials is increasingly pointed at the

¹⁹ See Marc Santora, “Pompeo Calls China’s Ruling Party ‘Central Threat of Our Times’”, *New York Times*, 30 January 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/30/world/europe/pompeo-uk-china-huawei.html>

²⁰ See Hal Brands, “How China Went from a Business Opportunity to Enemy No. 1”, *Bloomberg*, 6 September 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2018-09-06/how-china-went-from-a-business-opportunity-to-enemy-no-1>; AmCham China, *2017 China Business Climate Survey report*, AmCham, Beijing, 2017; AmCham China, *2019 China Business Climate Survey Report*, AmCham, Beijing, 2019.

seriousness of Chinese military and technological challenges and threats to the US.²¹

The point is that engaging in long-term comprehensive competition with a formidable power requires national resilience and broad support from the general public and stakeholders in the American democratic polity. The extent to which the current administration is publicly framing regional policies and frameworks (including the FOIP) as the foundation for enduring competition and rivalry with China is unprecedented, not since diplomatic relations between the two countries commenced in 1979. For this reason, and despite inevitable periods of respite and tactical cooperation with China, there is no turning back for the Trump administration.

(b) All Allies and Partners Are Valuable—But Some Are More Valuable Than Others

The increased focus on competition and rivalry with China means that the US will take on a somewhat more instrumental or outcome-focused mindset when it comes to allies and partners.

In this context, the current administration is adopting what might be termed an “enhanced balancing” or “enhanced countering” approach. This approach seeks to get more out of current alliance and security partnership relationships and structures. Rather than starting anew when it comes to security architecture, the US is seeking to make the current architecture (alliances, partnerships and other mechanisms including cooperative security ones), more effective in limiting and shaping

²¹ See, for example, Bill Gertz, “Pentagon: China Threat Increasing”, *Washington Times*, 26 February 2020, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2020/feb/26/mark-esper-china-threat-pentagons-highest-priority/>; Jessica Bursztynsky, “Secretary of State Pompeo: Huawei’s CEO ‘Isn’t Telling the American People the Truth’ on China Government Ties”, *CNBC*, 23 May 2019, <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/05/23/secretary-of-state-pompeo-huawei-saying-that-it-does-not-work-with-the-chinese-government-is-false.html>

Chinese strategic options and in complicating the strategic environment for Beijing.

This is taking several forms. In particular, the US is targeting specific alliance and security partners and directing resources and attention on building up bilateral and interoperational capabilities with those countries. The two most important countries are Japan and Australia, in that order. Under Shinzo Abe, Japan has emerged as the indispensable, most capable and willing ally in the Indo-Pacific region in the minds of influential American (and Australian) figures. Abe's deliberate focus on Japan's economic and diplomatic presence and relevance in Southeast Asia and India has also positioned Tokyo as the friendlier and more collaborative face of a US-led pushback against China in the region.

Japan and Australia are remarkably closely aligned with the US in promulgating for a FOIP and have moved decisively to a balancing or countering mindset vis-à-vis China. Both are also well positioned to counter Chinese capabilities and complicate Beijing's strategic planning in geographical and operational terms.²² For example, Japan is positioned to lead the defence or countermeasures against China in the northern part of the so-called First Island Chain (which runs from the Kuril Islands to the Japanese Archipelago, Taiwan, northern Philippines and eastern Malaysia). Australia is the "southern anchor" of the US-led approach.

Tellingly, both Tokyo and Canberra are supportive of the enhanced emphasis the US is placing on them, including a greater share of the security burden with respect to defence spending, hosting US assets, and preparedness to absorb the diplomatic, economic and even military costs of Chinese displeasure arising from confrontation. Indeed, there was high Australian enthusiasm for the upgrade of its Northern Territory military facilities to accommodate US long-range bombers and in providing additional logistical support for possible American and joint operations

²² See Andrew F. Krepinevich, *Preserving the Balance: A U.S. Eurasia Defense Strategy* (Washington, DC: CSBA, 19 January 2017), <https://csbaonline.org/research/publications/preserving-the-balance-a-u.s.-eurasia-defense-strategy/publication/1>

in East Asia. There is also a serious conversation about hosting American nuclear submarines in the future.²³ It is expected that joint efforts to develop and host land-based missiles will be part of future conversations between the US, Japan and Australia.²⁴

The American interest is not just to enhance inter-operability with two formidable allies but to improve its own strategic depth vis-à-vis growing Chinese military capabilities.

For geostrategic reasons, Vietnam and possibly the Philippines (after the Rodrigo Duterte government) are being identified as Tier 2 countries, given their strategic geographical locations and the likely willingness of these governments to adopt a more confrontational attitude to China, and to host US assets in future. The United States is also looking to aid these two countries—along with Singapore—through “internal balancing”: strengthening the indigenous and independent capacity of these countries.²⁵ Additionally, the recent US-Singapore renewal of a defence pact allowing American forces to use Singaporean air and naval facilities highlights Singapore’s importance to American balancing efforts.

In this context, an interesting omission from the list of high-priority countries is South Korea. Current President Moon Jae-in’s preference to reignite wartime issues with Japan—the only genuinely benign country in South Korea’s periphery—rather than on strategic threats and challenges such as North Korea and China is reducing Seoul’s relevance and usefulness as a strategic partner beyond Korean Peninsula issues. Beyond Moon, much will depend on whether Seoul remains preoccupied with the Korean Peninsula and, even if that were no longer the case, whether Seoul is prepared to risk Chinese displeasure over issues beyond its own periphery.

²³ See Mike Green and Andrew Shearer, “Countering China’s Militarization of the Indo-Pacific”, *War on the Rocks*, 23 April 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/04/countering-chinas-militarization-of-the-indo-pacific/>

²⁴ See Andrew Tillett, “Unbreakable: US Wants Missiles in Darwin”, *Australian Financial Review*, 4 August 2019, <https://www.afr.com/politics/federal/unbreakable-us-wants-missiles-in-darwin-20190804-p52dqy>

²⁵ See Shearer, “South-east Asia and Australia”.

None of this is to suggest that the current administration is looking to explicitly “downgrade” relations with other partners such as Malaysia, or abandon existing mechanisms for defence diplomacy. But there is an ongoing reassessment of emphasis and resources devoted to strategic and defence efforts for each country. In this sense, the US will not seek to retain its standing as the decisive strategic actor through harnessing all its security relationships but by strengthening its commitment to several countries that are considered strategically important and with a “can do” or “will do” mindset. For lower-priority countries, perhaps Washington will do just enough to ensure that these are not incentivized to align with China.

An interesting and highly significant variable is Taiwan. The US might well enlist Taiwan as a more active player in countering Chinese activities in the northern and central areas of the First Island Chain in return for enhanced and more explicit security guarantees against possible Chinese attack.²⁶ More pointedly, the US could reinvigorate defence relations with Taipei and help rearm and enhance Taiwan’s disruptive and defensive capabilities,²⁷ to the extent that China places renewed emphasis on the military balance in the Taiwan Straits in preference to its capacity to project power elsewhere and further afield.

One should bear in mind that there is a hard edge to the FOIP strategy which emanates out of the enhanced balancing approach. The current administration has moved to the forward-leaning position it now has because of China’s approach of easing the US out of the region without a

²⁶ A more forceful administration might put considerable pressure on Taiwan to abandon its claims to the South China Sea, or to reduce the area of these claims, as a diplomatic move to further isolate China on this issue. There is something to work with in this context, since Taiwan is already moderating its position on the South China Sea. See Lynn Kuok, “Tides of Change”, *Brookings Institution East Asia Policy Paper 5*, May 2015, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/taiwan-south-china-sea-kuok-paper.pdf>

²⁷ See Jim Thomas, Iskander Rehman, and John Stillion, *Hard ROC 2.0*. (Washington, DC: CSBA 21 December 2014), https://csbaonline.org/uploads/documents/2014-10-01_CSBA-TaiwanReport-1.pdf

war. It seeks to do so through “grey zone” coercion and action of which each individual move would not, in and of itself, trigger a military conflict (all the while improving its capacity to inflict “prohibitive” military costs on the US). Each individual Chinese move in the maritime, cyber, space and even economic domains gradually shifts the strategic equation in its favour and in ways that damage the interests of the US and erodes the credibility of the US-led alliance system.

For “enhanced balancing” to counter this Chinese strategy, the US needs to increase the costs of Chinese “grey zone” actions (in ways that do not involve military conflict). Whether one is engaged in countering “grey-zone” coercion, seeking to deter China militarily, or ensuring the credibility of alliances, the issue of relative “resolve” is all-important. The stronger the perceived resolve of the US and its allies/partners to take countermeasures and bear military and non-military costs, the greater the burden on China to inflict “prohibitive costs” on the US. In this context, “enhanced balancing” does not work if there is a “resolve deficit” with respect to either the US or its chosen allies/partners.

For these reasons, US intolerance of the wavering of allies/partners when it comes to demonstrating individual and collective resolve against China and Chinese activities will only grow. America is likely to make it increasingly clear to all allies and partners that there are no cost-free options. For “drifting” allies such as Thailand and non-allied security partners such as Malaysia, the US might well urge them to bring more to the table in terms of helping to balance China or suffer relative loss of relevance as more attention and resources are directed towards other states.

(c) Regional Diplomacy—Being Liked and Avoiding Offence No Longer Makes the Cut

The days of the US simply showing up in the region—literally and figuratively—and offering a friendly and inoffensive face is over. Belatedly, the US has realized that China views diplomacy, and the winning of friends and influencing nations, as a zero-sum and competitive endeavour, and Washington is adjusting quickly. The most obvious manifestation of that adjustment is the formulation of the FOIP which

puts forward a positive vision for the region and which is “inclusive” with respect to any nation prepared to support FOIP principles.²⁸ But it is also a framework aimed at countering Chinese values, policies and actions.

While the hedging nations of Southeast Asia continue to insist that they not be forced to choose between the US and China, there is increasing insistence by Washington that nations choose between competing sets of principles and aspirations for the region: the FOIP versus a hierarchical and Sino-centric vision of Asia where Beijing and Chinese entities are allowed rights and privileges not afforded to other nations and non-Chinese entities. Indeed, the current American perspective is that China’s demonstrated support for authoritarian regimes, principles and standards is intrinsically linked to its determination to reshape the region more akin to the Communist Party’s own image and preferences.²⁹

In this context, the US is growing increasingly intolerant of principles of neutrality which are formally favoured by organizations such as ASEAN. In the contemporary environment, such principles lead to indecisiveness, inactivity and a refusal to condemn revisionist powers even when the latter change the strategic environment in ways that are detrimental to the interests of ASEAN member states. For the US, persistent ASEAN calls for peace and stability entrench the status quo, but one in which China is given space to illegally advance its strategic position and interests while the United States is expected to refrain from any disruptive countermeasures. The American concern is that many Southeast Asians have normalized Chinese coercion and assertiveness and have baked in expectations of future Chinese dominance. Under these circumstances, Washington believes it has no option but to commit to a more muscular and disruptive diplomacy and language against China and towards regional states.

²⁸ See David Arase, *Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy Outlook*, Trends in Southeast Asia, no. 12/2019 (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2019).

²⁹ See Lavina Lee, “Democracy Promotion: ANZUS and the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy.”

This holds dangers for ASEAN and its cherished notion of “ASEAN diplomatic centrality”. Although ASEAN currently exists as a diplomatic rather than a strategic player, its diplomatic relevance might well diminish if it becomes viewed as part of the problem rather than the solution.³⁰ The perceived ineffectiveness of ASEAN in raising the diplomatic costs for Beijing for its assertive and illegal behaviour in the South China Sea means the US is less likely to rely on future institutional approaches to provide checks and balances against Chinese power even if lip service is paid to existing institutions for the sake of good regional citizenship.

After all, China has shown ability and willingness to absorb reputation and diplomatic costs. Washington is coming to the realization that efforts to increase merely reputational and diplomatic costs are unlikely to serve as an effective counter to Chinese policies. As Beijing is not standing still in advancing its interests at America’s expense, Washington will grow less tolerant of mindsets and activities that offer China diplomatic cover.

(d) Emphasis on “Fit-for-Purpose” Economic Arrangements

The emphasis on “free, fair and reciprocal” economic relationships (which includes renegotiating existing Free Trade Agreements and other agreements) serves the domestic purpose of ensuring a “better deal” for the American economy and its workers and firms.³¹ These principles, which come under the umbrella of the FOIP framework, also serve the purpose of propagating rules and practices of trade and investment which promote good governance, transparency, sensible debt management standards and high quality projects. The latter considerations are clearly aimed at countering alternative approaches which include opaque and

³⁰ See John Lee, *The “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” and Implications for ASEAN*.

³¹ See Kaewkamol Karen Pitakdumrongkit, “The Impact of the Trump Administration’s Indo-Pacific Strategy on Regional Economic Governance”, *East West Center Policy Studies No. 79*, 2019, https://www.eastwestcenter.org/system/tdf/private/ewc_policy_studies_79_web.pdf?file=1&type=node&id=37123

secretive arrangements concluded under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).³²

One example is the bipartisan passing of the Build Act in 2018 which created an overarching International Development Finance Corporation to better coordinate development assistance and investment in developing countries and help draw in private sector capital into investment projects. Importantly, the administration is open about much of the intention behind the Build Act. As Pompeo has stated, it “strengthens the US government’s development finance capacity, offering a better alternative to state-directed investments and advancing our foreign policy goals”.³³ Another example is the bipartisan Asia Reassurance Initiative Act which authorizes US\$1.5 billion per annum for programmes in East Asia such as joint maritime training and freedom of navigation operations. This is alongside growing appreciation of the need for the FOIP framework to provide Southeast Asian economies with alternatives to what China can offer when it comes to finance, infrastructure, commercial and technological alternatives.

More generally, the American audit of existing economic and finance arrangements as to whether they are fit-for-purpose in an era of strategic competition and rivalry with China will intensify. New arrangements and even existing institutions will be subject to assessments of whether these will advance or else impede America’s capacity to compete with China or promote one’s principles, interests or relative standing. Development assistance, infrastructure building and other commercial joint ventures are intrinsically linked to competition with China.

³² See John Lee, *Ambition and Overreach: Countering the Belt and Road Initiative and Beijing’s Plans to Dominate Global Innovation* (Washington, DC: Hudson Institute, February 2020), https://s3.amazonaws.com/media.hudson.org/John%20Lee_Ambition%20and%20Overreach%20-%20Countering%20One%20Belt%20One%20Road%20and%20Beijings%20Plans%20to%20Dominate%20Global%20Innovation.pdf

³³ Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, Landmark Development Finance Legislation Improves America’s Competitiveness Overseas Press Statement, 3 October 2018, <https://www.state.gov/landmark-development-finance-legislation-improves-americas-competitiveness-overseas/>

Similarly, American will no longer adopt a hands-off approach to defining and pursuing “open regionalism”. Washington will assess whether countries and entities operate according to liberal economic principles rather than trust the Southeast Asian consensus model of determining what is fair and unfair behaviour.

Additionally, bilateral and mini-lateral economic approaches such as the Trilateral Infrastructure Partnership between the US, Japan and Australia will be preferred because common and targeted objectives are easier to pursue with a smaller number of like-minded countries and governments than is the case within multilateral frameworks. The US will remain an active member of existing multilateral regimes like APEC. But as China has done for several decades, the US will actively seek to compete and advance specific interests through multilateral institutions and groupings rather than remain an indifferent and benign underwriter of such institutions. Indeed, the current administration has linked support for entities such as the Lower Mekong Initiative and the Indian Ocean Rim Association to the advancement of FOIP principles.³⁴

(e) ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific and the Quad

In many respects, the five key elements of the Indonesia-driven Indo-Pacific Cooperation concept as explained by President Jokowi Widodo at the East Asia Summit in November 2018³⁵—openness, inclusiveness, transparency, respect for international law and ASEAN centrality—is consistent with the FOIP framework.

The emphasis on respect for international law, resolving disputes peacefully and creating economic growth centres in the Indian and Pacific

³⁴ Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, Remarks on America’s Indo-Pacific Economic Vision to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Indo-Pacific Business Forum, 30 July 2018, <https://www.state.gov/remarks-on-americas-indo-pacific-economic-vision/>

³⁵ Indonesian Cabinet Secretariat, “Indo-Pacific Concept Important for ASEAN: President Jokowi”, 14 November 2018, <https://setkab.go.id/en/indo-pacific-concept-important-for-asean-president-jokowi/>

Oceans within an “open and fair” economic system³⁶ represents some concession to Trumpian economics and worldview but is nevertheless still acceptable to more cautious ASEAN states. While the subsequent *ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific*³⁷ does not use the term “free and fair”, it does highlight the importance of international law and the related right of freedom of navigation.

The ASEAN Outlook is an attempt to seize back the initiative from non-ASEAN states such as the Quad countries when it comes to defining the rules of the road for the Indo-Pacific. It is belated recognition that ASEAN cannot simply reject the FOIP completely but must come up with their own terms when engaging with the FOIP framework.

While the ASEAN Outlook meets the US on common ground in many respects, there is still a significant differing of mindset and intention. In a sense, the ASEAN Outlook begins from a different starting point, and seeks to reduce and manage strategic cooperation and tensions through reducing mistrust, the prospect of miscalculation and avoidance of zero-sum approaches. In contrast, the US has already determined that China has long been engaged in a zero-sum competition and rivalry with the US and that any Chinese cooperation is only tactical and never strategic. For this reason, the US does not believe merely reducing mistrust and avoidance of zero-sum thinking is the solution since an enduring competition and rivalry with China (precipitated by Beijing) is already long underway and entrenched. Reducing miscalculation can reduce accidental conflict but there is nothing accidental about the modernization of People’s Liberation Army forces, which are designed to inflict deliberate costs on American and allied forces.

Moreover, it is likely that the exclusion of “free” from the ASEAN Outlook is of concern for the US because Washington believes Beijing is consciously seeking to promote a suite of authoritarian values and

³⁶ See Jansen Tham, “What’s in Indonesia’s Indo-Pacific Cooperation Concept?”, *The Diplomat*, 16 May 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/05/whats-in-indonesias-indo-pacific-cooperation-concept/>

³⁷ https://asean.org/storage/2019/06/ASEAN-Outlook-on-the-Indo-Pacific_FINAL_22062019.pdf

practices onto the region, and which are fundamentally incompatible with key principles underlying the FOIP. For this reason, the primary intention of the ASEAN Outlook of promoting a consensus-building and inclusive approach to resolving differences will not suffice for the US even if the ASEAN Outlook represents the arrival of a more clear-eyed view of developments in the region by Southeast Asian states.

It is easy to construct and strike down the strawman that the Quad will never lead to a genuine military alliance between the four countries as India's land-based disputes with China and Pakistan leaves New Delhi too exposed to mischief-making by Beijing for it to ever focus adequately on Indo-Pacific maritime issues. That is an unnecessarily high standard which would invalidate the significance of any regional relationship or grouping short of those with US treaty allies.

The better starting point is to understand why Quad 2.0 has come about. The Quad was not reinstated to challenge ASEAN diplomatic centrality. It arose from its ashes because it consists of four countries whose willingness to balance against and counter Chinese power and actions is advancing much more rapidly than is the case in much of Southeast Asia. In straightforward terms, Quad members are seeking to balance and counter China (even if there is no agreed grand strategy between them) while Southeast Asians continue to hedge with varying degrees of adroitness and success.³⁸ In this sense, more forward-leaning and sensitive conversations about working together to balance and counter China will increasingly occur within the Quad structure, and not outside it.

The growing relevance of the Quad is based on this convergence vis-à-vis views of China. Although the US is the only Quad country to openly identify China as a competitor and rival, all members begin from the position that the primary problem is not mistrust or even miscalculation but have concluded that Beijing takes a fundamentally zero-sum and revisionist approach to extending its power and influence

³⁸ See Seng Tan, "Consigned to Hedge: Southeast Asia and America's 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy'", *International Affairs* 96, no. 1 (2020): 131–48.

in the Indo-Pacific—one designed to be at the expense of the US, its allies and countries such as India.

The progression from a senior officials' meeting in late 2017 to a Foreign Ministers meeting in September 2019 was predictable and is only the beginning. It would not be surprising if a meeting of Quad foreign ministers is eventually elevated to the same status as the Trilateral Security Dialogue between the US, Japan and Australia. More frequent or even institutionalized meetings between heads-of-government is also likely.

Meanwhile, senior officials from Quad countries are already meeting informally to discuss policy and operational issues of genuine substance. Importantly, they are doing so in the name of an evolving “Quad” grouping. Greater policy and operational cooperation through Quad mechanisms will invariably take place, given members' agreement on broad policies such as the need to counter the worst aspects of the BRI, the seriousness of Chinese intellectual property theft and appropriation, the need to coordinate export controls on critical technologies, and agreement that China cannot be allowed to behave in the Indian Ocean as it has in the East and South China Seas.

Moreover, and while the Quad does not exist to advance an aggressive democracy promotion agenda throughout the region, all its members agree that much of Beijing's assertive and revisionist objectives stem from the Communist Party and its authoritarian tendencies and insecurities. For this reason, there is general agreement amongst Quad members about the critical importance of domestic political institutions, processes and values and the relationship of these to external policy and objectives. In short, Quad members tend to agree that a Communist Party-led China is a big part of the problem.

These Quad mechanisms and conversations do not necessarily come at the expense of ASEAN but will occur regardless of the direction ASEAN and Southeast Asian states are heading in. There will also be different levels of engagement by Southeast Asian states with Quad mechanisms. Those states looking to balance and counter some aspects of Chinese power, for example, Vietnam and perhaps Indonesia, will become more interested in the Quad as the latter develops. Quad-plus meetings with select Southeast Asian countries are not inconceivable.

SIMILARITIES AND CHANGES UNDER A DEMOCRAT WHITE HOUSE

At the time of writing, the Democrat nominee is likely to be Joe Biden, even though Bernie Sanders is still in the race. Much of this section will focus on a potential Joe Biden presidency for three reasons:

1. The odds of Biden winning the nomination are looking increasingly favourable.
2. Biden is the “establishment” candidate whose personal views and mindsets, and those of key Democrat advisers likely to assume senior positions in a Biden administration, are well known and openly articulated—including through the National Security Action initiative which was founded by Ben Rhodes (Deputy National Security Adviser to President Obama) and Jake Sullivan (National Security Adviser to Vice President Biden).
3. The positions and mindsets of Sanders are opaque, poorly explained and constantly shifting.

Even so, one can make educated estimations about some aspects of where Sanders sits on the issues raised earlier. A section towards the end will address these.

(a) The Rhetoric Might Soften but It Will Still Be About Balancing and Countering 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 stop Taiwan’s diplomatic allies from cutting ties with Taipei due to pressure and/or incentives from Beijing, Democrat Speaker Nancy Pelosi reaffirmed Congress’ support for a “free, open and democratic Taiwan”.³⁹ Months earlier, Pelosi spoke

³⁹ 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>

strongly of her support for the Tibet Policy Act 2019 which supports the aspirations of the Tibetan people to protect their cultural identity.⁴⁰

The Democratic Party's hardening of positions against China is not only evident in Congress. In a joint article by Kurt Campbell and Jake Sullivan, two Democratic Party stalwarts who are likely to be nominated for high-level posts in a Biden presidency, it is argued 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 ..."⁴¹

Although the two authors, with an eye to the November 2020 presidential elections, are seeking to argue that the Democrat approach will be superior to that of the current administration, the basis for the more confrontational approach adopted by Trump is left intact. For example, and while both authors give their nod to better "crisis management" processes to ensure stable coexistence with China, they recognize that China has long been competing with America in all the aforementioned domains, and that 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".⁴²

Biden has gradually shifted and come around to the reality of strategic competition and rivalry with China.⁴³ As Sullivan (who exercises immense

⁴⁰ See Pelosi Floor Speech in Support of the Tibet Policy Act of 2019, 28 January 2020, <https://www.speaker.gov/newsroom/12820-0>

⁴¹ Kurt Campbell and Jake Sullivan, "Competition Without Catastrophe: How America Can Both Challenge and Coexist with China", *Foreign Affairs* 98, no. 5 (2019): 96–110 at p. 100.

⁴² Jake Sullivan, "Yes, America Can Still Lead the World", *The Atlantic*, Jan/Feb 2019, pp. 77–85 at p. 80.

⁴³ Compare Biden's comments in May 2019 to those in December 1919. See Emily Birnbaum, "2020 Hopeful Tim Ryan Knocks Biden's Comments on

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”⁴⁴ and if the US does not “set the agenda, it doesn’t happen”.⁴⁵ These sentiments are consistently heard in the author’s personal interactions with many other leading Democrat 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”⁴⁶ that was apparent under Obama is not likely to occur to the same extent under a Biden Presidency. But they are seeking to distinguish themselves when it comes to how America should meet the China challenge. These differences, as they relate to the FOIP and the Quad, will be discussed below.

(b) Still a FOIP—But Shifting Away from “Unilateralism” and with Overt Emphasis on Allies and Partners

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

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

⁴⁴ Jake Sullivan, “Yes, America Can Still Lead the World”, at p. 80.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, at p. 82.

⁴⁶ See David Santoro and John K. Warden, “Assuring Japan and South Korea in the Second Nuclear Age”, *Washington Quarterly* 38, no. 1 (2015): 147–55.

preserve and advance the principles of a FOIP and “advancing American global leadership”, which is the mission of the National Security Action.⁴⁷

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 in achieving its objectives, meaning an eventual emphasis on material 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, including supersonic 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.⁴⁸

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”.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ <https://nationalsecurityaction.org/>

⁴⁸ 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>

⁴⁹ Jake Sullivan, “Yes, America Can Still Lead the World”, at p. 78.

If the Democrats were to win office, one suspects that scepticism towards multilateral approaches will not completely subside. As previously argued, 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 organizations 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 did, 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 in the military, economic, political and global governance realms.

(c) 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 approach, and there will be mixed blessings

for those states seeking to keep out of the fray. Trump’s more unilateral approach inadvertently allowed some states to sit on the sidelines even if they were criticized 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 which 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.⁵⁰ Sullivan recommends the US increasing naval operations in the South China Sea and “getting its partners to do the same”,⁵¹ 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 accept this “security burden”.

Similarly, there is consensus among Democrats that America has an economic “structural imbalance” with China, that Beijing illegitimately

⁵⁰ For example, see Kurt Campbell and Jake Sullivan, “Competition Without Catastrophe: How America Can Both Challenge and Coexist with China”, at pp. 101–2.

⁵¹ Jake Sullivan, “Yes, America Can Still Lead the World”, at p. 83.

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.⁵² In enlisting one's allies, partners and friends, it is likely that a Democrat administration will seek more collective economic and diplomatic action to dissuade or mitigate Chinese economic behaviour. 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 being given to how military, economic and diplomatic resources and tools can be better integrated to achieve national security objectives vis-à-vis China.⁵³

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 BRI 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 5G 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 on this issue. Indeed, Democrats have criticized the

⁵² Kurt Campbell and Jake Sullivan, "Competition Without Catastrophe: How America Can Both Challenge and Coexist with China".

⁵³ 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>

current administration for failing to “coordinate with allies and partners in advance”.⁵⁴

With respect to ASEAN, Biden will certainly be more engaged personally than is Trump. The Democrats seek collective responses to threats and challenges (to the US and broader system) that involve collective action under American leadership, and which involves the assertion of such leadership in institutional processes and outcomes. 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 and ingratiating diplomacy, a Biden presidency will not look kindly on an ASEAN agenda that emphasizes 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 consistently 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 such as the Mekong. Importantly, a Biden presidency would not tolerate ASEAN or certain individual states cherry-picking standards or projects that suited 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 de-emphasis on ASEAN and intensification of focus on like-minded Southeast Asian countries and on entities like the Quad for the reasons offered earlier. Indeed, Democrats

⁵⁴ See Kurt Campbell and Jake Sullivan, “Competition Without Catastrophe: How America Can Both Challenge and Coexist with China”.

prefer institutional responses, and the desire to further institutionalize and expand the role of the Quad may be expected to grow.

(d) The Weaponization of Democracy Promotion and Liberal Values

Even though Democrats would not endorse the “weaponization” 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 emphasized 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.⁵⁵ This includes restoring “America’s moral leadership” through a “global summit for democracy”.⁵⁶

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.

(e) What About a Bernie Sanders White House?

A Sanders administration will be at least as much of a mystery as what a Trump White House was to the world back in November 2017. Although Sanders has been in national politics since 1991 and Senator of Vermont

⁵⁵ See, for example, Biden’s Twitter feed on 4 June 2019, <https://twitter.com/joebiden/status/1135982349424963585?lang=en>

⁵⁶ <https://joebiden.com/americanleadership/>

since 2007, his policy interests are overwhelmingly domestic. The shock of an American President who describes himself as a “socialist” and honeymooned in the Soviet Union will affect American markets and make many of the country’s liberal internationalists profoundly uncomfortable, with deep impacts on America’s standing as the underwriter and defender of the liberal global order. However, the caveat is that his specific foreign policies remain a matter of deep speculation.

The one consistency in Sanders’ worldview is that he is an economic nationalist but one preferring redistribution to the pro-growth policies of Trump. In this sense, Sanders sees economic globalization, and China’s emergence most of all, as a major factor behind the loss of manufacturing jobs and lower wages for Americans.⁵⁷ He has called for a “global progressive movement” which encompasses the weakening of oligarchies and “corporate power”.⁵⁸

Additionally, Sanders openly praises the economic performance of China’s authoritarian leaders but seemingly attributes the economic success to Beijing’s communist principles rather than the country’s participation in the global economy.⁵⁹ The point is that even Trump’s emphasis on “free, fair and reciprocal” trade would be too liberal or globalist a view for Sanders. If Trump is caricatured as a “unilateralist”, Sanders comes close to a proud economic isolationist intent on an enormous redistribution agenda domestically. Trump might seek to renegotiate economic agreements, but Sanders is sceptical of them altogether.

⁵⁷ See Sanders’ Twitter feed on 1 May 2019, <https://twitter.com/berniesanders/status/1123743871375151104?lang=en>

⁵⁸ See Dougal Robinson, “The Frontrunners: Foreign Policy and the Democratic Party in 2020”, *United States Studies Centre Report*, September 2019, at p. 10, <https://www.ussc.edu.au/analysis/the-frontrunners-foreign-policy-and-the-democratic-party-in-2020>

⁵⁹ See Nancy LeTourneau, “Digging Deeper Into Sander’s Statements on Cuba and China”, *Washington Monthly*, 26 February 2020, <https://washingtonmonthly.com/2020/02/26/digging-deeper-into-sanders-statements-on-cuba-and-china/>

Moreover, while Sanders speaks about the need for a more “moral” and “less hypocritical” foreign policy, he is openly critical of large defence budgets and wary of America’s international role, which he sees as “interfering” and counterproductive. Most of his criticisms have been reserved for Washington’s policies in the Middle East (e.g., costly wars and support for authoritarian states such as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait) and has not engaged substantially in Indo-Pacific debates.⁶⁰

However, Sanders and influential advisers such as Matt Duss are unlikely to support an expansive Indo-Pacific Strategy, nor the free and open economic agenda favoured by mainstream candidates. Duss has expressed concerns about China’s economic practices and poor human rights record.⁶¹ But rather than confront and countering countries with whom the US has differences, Duss prefers non-military and “cheaper” options of arriving at a *modus vivendi* with Beijing.⁶²

If elected, Sanders will have to confront the reality that he cannot ignore Chinese challenges to American interests and values and that stepping back from the Indo-Pacific is not an option. This is not the same argument that Sanders will default to the mainstream Democrat platforms. Even if “mugged by reality” as Irvine Kristol once described progressive liberals before transforming into neoconservatives,⁶³ Sanders will bring his democratic socialist worldview into the White House. His responses to challenges and threats are not yet known. But

⁶⁰ See Robbie Gramer, “Bernie’s Outsider on the Inside”, *Foreign Policy*, 27 February 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/02/27/matt-duss-bernie-sanders-foreign-policy-2020-presidential-election/>

⁶¹ See Matthew Petti, “Is Bernie Sanders a National Security Realist?”, *The National Interest*, 12 February 2020, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/bernie-sanders-national-security-realist-122691>

⁶² See Thomas Wright, “The Real Progressive-Centrist Divide on Foreign Policy”, *The Atlantic*, 18 February 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/02/progressive-centrist-divide/606646/>

⁶³ See Douglas Murray, “A Liberal Mugged by Reality”, *The Spectator*, 26 September 2009, <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/-a-liberal-mugged-by-reality->

it will not be bound by the established rulebook of doubling down on alliances and partnerships to balance and counter, define the liberal rules of the road, and use carrots and sticks to persuade China to adhere to those rules.

For Southeast Asians who fear abandonment, an inward-focused and retreating America accompanied by the loss of power projection and influence, and an administration that is unsympathetic to the value of economic interdependence in serving the development goals of regional states, a Sanders victory would be the worst result in November.

CONCLUSION

There are aspects to a second-term Trump administration or a Biden presidency which ought to be welcomed by Southeast Asians and there are elements that should cause some concern. A Sanders victory is the worst outcome and should cause immense angst.

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.

Finally, Southeast Asians might well argue that they remain apart from the fray because of doubts about American staying power, effectiveness and predictability under any administration. Under a second-term Trump or first-term Biden administration, the response will be that Southeast Asians have agency and influence over this issue. The more disruption, risk and even cost they are prepared to take on collectively with the US (and other countries such as Japan and Australia,), the greater the prospects that the US can expand its role in the Indo-Pacific.

After all, the American retort would be that many Southeast Asians have “normalized” Chinese assertiveness and coercion which has led to deterioration in the security environment. The more they stand aside, the greater the prospect for Beijing to achieve its objective of removing potential complications and pieces from the chessboard—to the detriment of the US and Southeast Asians.

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