



# BIDEN'S INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGY EXPECTATIONS AND CHALLENGES

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Biden's Indo-Pacific Strategy: Expectations and Challenges

Based on the ISAS-SPF Panel Discussion on 'Post-Elections US Policy towards the Indo-Pacific: Expectations and Challenges'

27 November 2020

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# Biden's Indo-Pacific Strategy: Expectations and Challenges

Institute of South Asian Studies  
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## Executive Summary

*China's rise, the uncertainty of United States' (US) policies and the ensuing anxieties of Asia's regional powers over the future of Indo-Pacific have rendered the 2020 US presidential election importance of historic proportions.*

The Donald Trump administration realigned America's foreign policy towards an Indo-Pacific strategy from Barack Obama's 'Pivot to Asia' policy. Yet, Trump's foreign policy transactionalism and his emphasis on strict reciprocity have made America's strategic partners question the sincerity of its commitments. China's rise, the uncertainty of United States' (US) policies and the ensuing anxieties of Asia's regional powers over the future of Indo-Pacific have rendered the 2020 US presidential election importance of historic proportions. How will the result of the US election influence Washington's policy in the Indo-Pacific? Would the next administration continue to confront China's assertive behaviour or will it try to achieve accommodation with Beijing? How are the US' allies and the strategic partners looking at the domestic transition and what do they expect from the new administration?

In an effort to address these questions, the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS) at the National University of Singapore and the Sasakawa Peace Foundation (SPF), Japan, organised an on-line panel discussion on 27 November 2020 on the expectations and challenges for the incoming president, Joe Biden. Titled 'Post-election US Policy toward the Indo-Pacific: Expectations and Concerns', the event witnessed the panellists reviewing the consequences of the presidential election on the geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific. They reflected on the shifts in domestic politics, the future of US foreign policy in the Indo-Pacific and discussed the expectations and anxieties among the US allies and strategic partners, particularly Japan and India over American foreign and security policy commitments in the region. This Special Report has been prepared based on the discussions during the panel discussion.

Over the last four years, the Trump administration has caused disruptions to the traditional US approach towards alliances and strategic partners. Even Trump's Indo-Pacific strategy has struggled to cope with the transition of power in the region, with China emerging

stronger in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. Biden will face an uphill task in defining an Indo-Pacific strategy which will not only have to advance the gains made by Trump's combative approach towards China but also address the pitfalls of Trump's foreign policy transactionalism. The Trump-induced Cold War between the world's two largest economies has also created fears of entrapment among many countries in the region. At the same time, allies and partners fear that any retreat from the policy of standing up to China's assertiveness would automatically translate into abandonment by the US.

Moving forward, the challenges Biden faces are multiple: a bitterly divided domestic political scene in the US; an assertive China which is further emboldened by its quick recovery from a global pandemic while the rest of the world reels under its impact; allies and partners who fear China's rising assertiveness on one hand, and possible abandonment by the US on the other; and finally, the smaller nations of Southeast Asia which will be entrapped in the ever increasing hostility of the Sino-US Cold War.

*The Trump-induced Cold War between the world's two largest economies has also created fears of entrapment among many countries in the region.*



## Introduction

The momentum up to the US election and even the post-elections dynamics underline the importance of domestic politics on foreign policy. Given the importance of the US and how it affects everyone else in the world, it is only natural that domestic power transitions in the US invite close global scrutiny mainly because of two reasons. First, the last four years under the Trump administration have introduced disruptions in the way the US deals with the world, economically, diplomatically and militarily. The incoming US president will have the challenge of assessing, discarding or modifying the profound changes brought about by Trump in America's dealing with the world. Second, Trump's imprint on the US' global role is not limited to its material consequences. No other president has challenged the post-war American internationalism in the way Trump did. In other words, Trump questioned economic globalisation, doubted the sustainability of US alliances, closed America's border and practised trade wars in the past four years. Trump's policies violated many of the sacred assumptions of the liberal world order the US had so assiduously built since the end of the Second World War. Nowhere else is this break from American traditions of diplomacy and statecraft felt more strongly than in the Indo-Pacific.

*Irrespective of Trump's partisan domestic politics, the US has adopted a more assertive attitude towards Beijing's intransigence in the region.*

As the resident hegemon of the region, American involvement in the Indo-Pacific is not only critical to the security of its allies and partners but it also signals Washington's resolve and power to maintain the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific. However, even when there is bipartisan consensus in the US on the need to counter China's revisionist aims and assertive behaviour in the region, the intensity of its engagement and commitment has not escaped the vagaries of domestic politics and leadership styles. Irrespective of Trump's partisan domestic politics, the US has adopted a more assertive attitude towards Beijing's intransigence in the region. In both words and deeds, the Trump administration realigned American foreign policy towards an Indo-Pacific strategy. Yet, Trump's foreign policy transactionalism and his emphasis on strict reciprocity have

made America's strategic partners question the sincerity of its commitments. Moreover, the ensuing coldness in Sino-US relations has also made the regional actors jittery since they feel compelled to choose between Washington and Beijing. If America's allies and partners fear abandonment, neutral nations, particularly in Southeast Asia, feel entrapped in this Sino-American Cold War. The uncertainty of US policies and the ensuing anxieties of Asia's regional powers over the future of Indo-Pacific have rendered the 2020 US presidential election importance of historic proportions.

Biden has an enormous task of managing the rise of an assertive China, along with fulfilling the varied expectations of the US' allies, strategic partners and other actors in the region. The opinion on how China and the Indo-Pacific are best managed is bitterly divided. One formula is to accept China's rise in the region and aim for an Obama-type Group of 2 (or G2). This would help the global economic recovery during the times of the COVID-19 pandemic and may alleviate fears of entrapment among the Southeast Asian countries and other smaller actors in the region. However, any attempts at reconciliation will have to be measured against China's revisionist aims in the Indo-Pacific, its challenge to American primacy in the region, and finally the feelings of its allies and partners which face the brunt of China's territorial aggression, economic coercion and diplomatic assertiveness.

*The opinion on how China and the Indo-Pacific are best managed is bitterly divided.*

The question of Indo-Pacific will, therefore, emerge as a key focus on Biden's foreign policy. How will the US election result influence Washington's policy in the Indo-Pacific? Will the next administration continue to confront China's assertive behaviour or will it try to achieve accommodation with Beijing? How are America's allies and strategic partners looking at the domestic transition and what do they expect from the new administration? To answer these questions, ISAS and SPF organised a panel of experts to review the consequences of the recent presidential election on the geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific. The panel reflected on the shifts in domestic politics and the future of US foreign policy in the Indo-Pacific. It also discussed the expectations and anxieties among US partners over its foreign and security policy commitments in the region.

## Trump's Indo-Pacific Strategy and Biden's Way Forward

Announcing his new Indo-Pacific strategy titled 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' (FOIP) in late 2017, Trump underlined his vision for the Indo-Pacific region in these words, "The Indo-Pacific region is where sovereign and independent nations can all prosper side-by-side and thrive in freedom and in peace."<sup>1</sup> Though the FOIP shared the basic aspiration of a stable Indo-Pacific against China's rising territorial, diplomatic and economic assertiveness with Obama's strategy of rebalancing towards the Indo-Pacific, it also aimed to rectify several lacunas in Obama's rebalance of the Indo-Pacific.

*However, Trump's approach, unlike that of his predecessors, was one of confrontation and containment rather than accommodation and dialogue.*

First, the Trump administration unequivocally accepted the rise of China as the biggest threat to stability of the Indo-Pacific, but more importantly, to US primacy in the region. However, Trump's approach, unlike that of his predecessors, was one of confrontation and containment rather than accommodation and dialogue.

Second, while previous US administrations had felt the need to call out Beijing's open defiance of the rule of law in the region, the Trump administration showed both power and resolve in confronting China in the Indo-Pacific. For example, the vigour and intensity of US military's freedom of navigation operation in the South China Sea did indeed signal to the region that Washington was not going to let Beijing feel comfortable with its territorial revisionism.

Third, if the military resolve was on ample display, the FOIP also dovetailed tools of economic and diplomatic coercion to provide a coherent response to China's rise in the region. Trump's China policy has been a comprehensive confrontation with total decoupling of the two economies and a trade war and intertwines with its approach to the Indo-Pacific. The trade wars may have been influenced by Trump's 'America First' approach but they did outline a growing realisation in

<sup>1</sup> Donald Trump, "Remarks by President Trump at the APEC CEO Summit", Da Nang, Vietnam, 10 November 2017. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-apec-ceosummit-da-nang-vietnam/>.

the US that China's military capabilities were indeed built upon the gains accrued to the Chinese economy through its participation in the American-sponsored liberal economic order.

Lastly, even when Trump tried to instil greater reciprocity in the US' relationship with regional allies and partners, the FOIP focussed on resuscitating the multilateral cooperation among the large regional democracies. This was the beginning of the Trump administration's emphasis on a US-Japan-Australia-India quadrilateral or Quad security cooperation. Reinvigorating the otherwise dormant grouping of the Quad was indeed the singular contribution of Trump's FOIP strategy in the Indo-Pacific. Almost a decade after the Quad was initially conceptualised in 2007, the four liberal democracies in the Indo-Pacific region – the US, Japan, Australia and India – agreed to not only revive the coalition but have also taken a few gingerly steps towards its institutionalisation.

*This was the beginning of the Trump administration's emphasis on a US-Japan-Australia-India quadrilateral or Quad security cooperation.*

Notwithstanding the unceremonious exit of Trump from American domestic politics, his administration did leave a mark on the Indo-Pacific region. As Singapore's former diplomat Bilahari Kausikan remarked on the eve of the US election, "We will look back on Trump with nostalgia."<sup>2</sup>

In theory, the US made some movement on its promise to confront China's assertiveness, back a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific and bring together allies and partners by not only reassuring them of US interests in the Indo-Pacific but also openly voicing its support for their interests vis-à-vis China. However, in practice, the strategy faced several challenges despite two successful security meetings held over four years.

Firstly, Trump's Indo-Pacific vision was clouded by the lack of coordination in its foreign policy practice. For example, there were no joint statements released by the Quad despite having two successful quadrilateral dialogues. The Quad countries have started talking once

<sup>2</sup> Bhavan Jaipragas, "Asian leaders see renewed hope in Biden and US return to multilateralism", *South China Morning Post*, 8 November 2020. <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3108980/asian-leaders-see-renewed-hope-biden-and-us-return>.

*This inherent transactionalism in Trump's diplomacy was partially responsible for the cautious approach adopted by countries such as India, Australia and Japan.*

again but how far are they willing to coordinate and contribute to a stable Indo-Pacific is still a bit fuzzy. America's strategic allies and partners remained doubtful over Trump's continued commitment to a confrontationist stance vis-à-vis China, especially as the president was personally inclined towards reaching profitable peace with China. This inherent transactionalism in Trump's diplomacy was partially responsible for the cautious approach adopted by countries such as India, Australia and Japan. However, the negative fall-outs of Trump's peculiarities were offset by China's territorial, diplomatic and economic assertiveness. The success of Trump's Indo-Pacific strategy in part goes to the heavy-handedness of China's behaviour.

Secondly, Trump's domestic rhetoric of 'America First' failed to complement his foreign policy. The fundamental assumption underlying Trump's populist political gimmick of 'America First' was that the US had been robbed economically not only by China but also by its allies and partners. Trump went on renegotiating the costs of bilateral alliances not only with allies like Japan and South Korea but also targetted the preferential commercial treatment to regional partners like India. This severely strained the US' outreach to its allies and partners. The regional partners expected much more economic support from America. However, Trump's economic isolation and demands of strict reciprocity created serious tensions in the US' relationship with several countries in the Indo-Pacific. It also raised question marks over America's leadership and the costs which both allies and partners would have to pay in keeping Washington fully involved in managing peace and security in the region.

Lastly, Trump's polarising domestic politics and his penchant for dividing American public opinion were a major distraction. The decline of American power in the last decade is linked to the growing domestic divide between the Democrats and the Republicans, causing major confrontation between the executive and legislative branches of the US government. Trump's arrival and his eventful tenure in the White House have only furthered the partisan character of US domestic politics. The Trump administration also suffered from the

lack of clear leadership in key bureaucracies. Though Secretary of State Mike Pompeo ultimately provided a steady hand at the State Department, the twists and turns of frequent leadership changes in key bureaucracies left the region anxious of the tone and tenor of US engagement with the region.

Biden will not only have to build upon the strengths of Trump's Indo-Pacific strategy but also rectify its obvious shortfalls. Though there are major differences between the left-wing and progressive sections of the Democratic Party, Biden's Indo-Pacific strategy will continue to be driven by China mainly to safeguard the interests of alliances and strategic partners. Biden has stated that the US will get tough on China by imposing sanctions if the latter threatens the US citizens and companies. Soon after the election results, Biden's call with Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen demonstrated reassurance to allies and democratic partners.

Like any other incoming administration, the Biden administration will take some time to settle down and brainstorm a coherent strategy to tackle the most important geopolitical question staring at the US: how to deal with China's rise? Biden's transition team is currently divided into three camps: competitors (who see China as the greatest challenge); centrists (comfortable in either camp); and optimists (cautious and willing to accommodate China to get its support and a free trade deal). While the Indo-Pacific policy will see a lot of continuation from the previous government, there will be some nuances.

*While the Indo-Pacific policy will see a lot of continuation from the previous government, there will be some nuances.*

First, unlike Trump's total policy of complete confrontation, Biden will continue to be tough on China but may allow room for cooperation on issues such as climate change. Biden will also follow on the footsteps of Obama, emphasising the liberal economic order and strengthening diplomatic ties with allies and partners. However, given the damages done to US democracy by the Trump administration, much of Biden's energy will be consumed by the serious task of restoring the executive's capacity to make decisions through a capable cabinet

and steeped in institutionalised, rather than idiosyncratic, decision-making.

Secondly, unlike Trump's call for America's splendid isolationism as a cure for its economic and domestic challenges, Biden will focus his energies in reinforcing the US' primacy in global affairs and reinvigorating American leadership during this period of global power transition.<sup>3</sup> Biden's aim will also be to arrest the rhetoric and perceptions of America's decline and to work with institutions, allies and partners in championing common interests, more through consultations rather than hard bargaining.

*Autocracies and human rights violations will invite serious scrutiny under the Biden administration and demands for adherence to democratic values will gain significant support.*

Thirdly, Biden will take into consideration the advice and perspectives of the Congress, allies and other democratic states. This will create room for greater cooperation with allied states and strengthen existing bilateral and multi-lateral relationships. Autocracies and human rights violations will invite serious scrutiny under the Biden administration and demands for adherence to democratic values will gain significant support. This may pose some problems in bilateral relationships with countries where nationalism is on the rise such as India. However, concerns on democracy and human rights will not derail strategic partnerships with allies and strategic partners.

Overall, there are expectations that the Biden administration will reverse some of Trump's isolationist tendencies and his proclivity towards unilateralism in the conduct of US foreign policy. A consensual approach based on dialogue and debate will underline America's support to long-standing allies and partners and reassure them of its security, economic and diplomatic commitment to secure their interests and to maintain a rule-based order in the Indo-Pacific.

The new US administration must remain steadfast in countering China's territorial aggression, its economic coercion and its diplomatic assertiveness against regional powers, whether big or small. It must also clearly signal its unflinching resolve to meet any show of force by

<sup>3</sup> Joseph R Biden, "Why America Must Lead Again", *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2020. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-01-23/why-america-must-lead-again>

Beijing and indicate that the US is not going to back down in competing with China over core national interests and values. This is the only way to provide the reassurance that the US is committed to stability and peace in the Indo-Pacific region. Biden's ability to successfully rally the US, its allies and strategic partners towards the cause of a FOIP will determine the efficiency of his Indo-Pacific strategy.



## India's Outlook on the Indo-Pacific

*Through the Quad, it is evident that India is trying to devise a stronger Indo-Pacific approach with other like-minded nations.*

As in the case of the US, China remains central to India's Indo-Pacific strategy. Given China's growing penetration of the Indian Subcontinent and the multi-fold threat it presents to the Indian state, New Delhi's resolve to become an Indo-Pacific power has gained traction in recent years.<sup>4</sup> Through the Quad, it is evident that India is trying to devise a stronger Indo-Pacific approach with other like-minded nations. India has supported the securitisation of the Quad with joint military exercises focussed on building interoperability, intelligence cooperation and logistical support among the Quad countries. This is indeed India's first steps in recognising and embracing a new security architecture for the region. The ongoing military crisis on the Himalayas has only increased India's resolve to reappraise its previous policy of accommodation and dialogue with China. New Delhi now aims to integrate itself more with the US and other regional powers to balance China's growing power in the region.

India is concerned about Chinese activities in the Exclusive Economic Zone and its increasing foothold in the Bay of Bengal. China's deep-sea exploration vessels are undertaking research in the Bay of Bengal, yielding data and information that can be utilised for military purposes. It will greatly contribute to China's domain awareness of this strategic space. In the past few years, the number of Chinese research vessels intruding into the Andaman and Nicobar Islands have increased dramatically. For example, according to the Indian Navy, in September 2019, four to six Chinese research vessels were found to be operating in the Indian Ocean region.<sup>5</sup> These vessels are used to survey various parameters, including currents and salinity as well as mapping the ocean floor. Such information will eventually assist the People's Liberation Army Navy in undertaking submarine operations in these waters. Along with the rapid rise of the Chinese navy and its increasing operational tempo in the Indian Ocean, such research

<sup>4</sup> Indo-Pacific Division, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 7 February 2020. [https://mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Indo\\_Feb\\_07\\_2020.pdf](https://mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Indo_Feb_07_2020.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> Shaurya Karanbir, "Alarm over Chinese research ships in Indian Ocean Region," *The Economic Times*, 30 January 2020. [https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/alarm-over-chinese-research-ships-in-indian-ocean-region/articleshow/73755293.cms?utm\\_source=contentofinterest&utm\\_medium=text&utm\\_campaign=cppst](https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/alarm-over-chinese-research-ships-in-indian-ocean-region/articleshow/73755293.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst).

activities forebode a strategy to displace India's military primacy in the Indian Ocean region.

India and the US share common concerns in the Indo-Pacific mainly regarding China's blatant refusal to follow a rules-based order in the region. India looks at the US as an important strategic and defence partner. Indo-US defence relationship has grown by leaps and bounds in the last decade. As China increases in military pressure, both along the land border and in the maritime space of the Indian Ocean, New Delhi is increasingly relying upon the US to balance China's military capabilities.<sup>6</sup> Under Trump, the US reaffirmed India's status as a major defence partner, according it preferential access to American military equipment and technology. However, Trump's support for India's military modernisation sat uncomfortably with his diplomatic inertness. For instance, he did not attend the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) summits and failed to be proactive in addressing the concerns of the regional countries. However, India did welcome Trump's rigid stance on China, and his inclination to confront Beijing's territorial assertiveness was a positive break from a more cautious approach under Obama.

*As China increases in military pressure, both along the land border and in the maritime space of the Indian Ocean, New Delhi is increasingly relying upon the US to balance China's military capabilities.*

The US has maintained a steady relationship with India. However, there is a feeling in New Delhi that the US is still not ready to embrace the idea of a multipolar Asia and to rethink new permutations of regional security cooperation beyond the design of hub-and-spoke alliance partnerships. As India's External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar, speaking at the India Ideas Summit on 22 July 2020, organised by the US India Business Council, stated, "the US really has to learn to work in a sense with a more multipolar world, with more plurilateral arrangements, go beyond alliances with which really it has grown up over the last two generations. The quest in the last 20 years and that will likely continue into the future is really to find more common ground."<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, the US is also concerned about India's

6 Statements and Releases, Joint Statement: Vision and Principles for the United States-India Comprehensive Global Strategic Partnership, the White House, 25 February 2020. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/joint-statement-vision-principles-united-states-india-comprehensive-global-strategic-partnership/>.

7 Press Statements, EAM's interaction at USIBC India Idea Summit, (22 July 2020), Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 30 July 2020. <https://www.mea.gov.in/interviews.htm?dtl/32863>.

sincerity in understanding the China threat. Making a case for economic disengagement with China, Pompeo has urged India to do more against China, "India has a chance to take global supply chains away from China and reduce its reliance on Chinese companies in [the] areas of telecommunications, medical supplies and others."<sup>8</sup> The issue of Chinese technology, especially the role of Huawei in India's 5G future, has created some tensions between the two strategic partners. India's resistance to ban Chinese telecommunication companies such as Huawei and ZTE Corporation from participating in 5G trials at a time when the US banned Huawei highlighted the general mismatch in expectations.

*Biden's victory sends out a clear message to the US' allies in the Indo-Pacific region that their domestic governance and regional diplomacy will receive increased focus.*

On technology transfers, the incoming Biden administration is set to continue the momentum of the relations with a few nuances. Biden's victory sends out a clear message to the US' allies in the Indo-Pacific region that their domestic governance and regional diplomacy will receive increased focus. Biden's policies towards India is likely to be a combination of cooperation and concerns.

The first concern will be Biden's focus on democratic norms and human rights, which will lead to some friction with India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi's domestic agenda. Kashmir and the question of religious polarisation in India will probably dominate Indo-US relations, especially with the progressive left section of the incoming Democratic administration.

Secondly, India's military procurements from Russia too will come under scrutiny. There is no love lost between the Democrats and Russia's President Vladimir Putin, and the Indo-Russian relationship will create its own complexities for the Indo-US relationship. Yet, the strategic logic of Indo-US relationship and the need to counter China's growing footprint in the region will ensure that the Indo-US relationship maintains its momentum and is not derailed by the domestic agenda of either of the two countries.

<sup>8</sup> Neha Arora and Aftab Ahmed, "Pompeo urges India to reduce dependence on China", *Reuters*, 22 July 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-india-usa-china/pompeo-urges-india-to-reduce-dependence-on-china-idUSKCN24N213>.

However, the US will work with India and other like-minded states to pool their efforts in the face of common concerns, especially China. Fundamentally, India and the US agree on the growing geostrategic challenge posed by China, which will continue to provide an enduring foundation for a close US-India strategic partnership. On the security side, China's approach to the US allies and neighbours has also reinvigorated a stricter action by Washington. Given that the relationship between the US and India will be primarily security driven, the two countries will look to strengthen the security partnership and, at the same time, aim to expand the relationship into more areas beyond security. Furthermore, the unprecedented impact of COVID-19 has open doors for both countries to work closely to fight the pandemic. Both sides will pay greater attention to fomenting the diplomatic and military relationships with the Quad countries and in institutionalising the Quad into a concrete collective security system in the Indo-Pacific. Biden's emphasis on restoring relations with US allies and re-establishing a leading role for the US in world politics works in India's interests. In a post-pandemic world, common interests such as China and the economic impact of COVID-19 will bring India and the US closer to each other.

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## Japan, Biden and the Indo-Pacific

In 2019, the then-Prime Minister Shinzo Abe put the FOIP at the centre of Japan's foreign policy.<sup>9</sup> Japan, like India, has called the FOIP a "vision" instead of a "strategy".<sup>10</sup> There are three pillars of Japan's efforts toward a FOIP. The first is the promotion and solidifying of the rule of law, freedom of navigation and economic interdependence. The second is the pursuit of economic prosperity through enhancing connectivity projects, through quality infrastructure development in accordance with international standards and transparency. The last is Japan's commitment to fomenting regional peace and stability by providing assistance for capacity building on maritime law enforcement and cooperation in the fields of disaster risk reduction and non-proliferation.<sup>11</sup>

*The Japan-US alliance is the bedrock of Japan's security policy and strategy to counter China's growing threat to its territorial integrity.*

Japan's concerns about Chinese activities in the Indo-Pacific stem primarily from Chinese intrusions in the Japanese territorial waters in the East China Sea.<sup>12</sup> The Japan-US alliance is the bedrock of Japan's security policy and strategy to counter China's growing threat to its territorial integrity. However, Japan has tried its level best to separate its security concerns vis-à-vis Beijing from its economic relationship with China. The latter continues to be Japan's largest trading partner. Unlike India and the US, which have tried to decouple their economies with China, Japan has remained committed to sustaining its economic interdependence with China. Though ambivalent on the Belt and Road Initiative, Japan has signed the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership agreement.

The Trump administration did invoke some serious concerns in Tokyo. First, Trump's domestic politics created unprecedented polarisation in the country which hurt Japan's cause, as the security relationship with Tokyo has enjoyed unfettered bipartisan support from both

9 James D J Brown, "Promoting Japan's answer to China's Belt and Road", *Nikkei Asia*, 25 April 2019. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Opinion/Promoting-Japan-s-answer-to-China-s-Belt-and-Road>.

10 The Prime Minister's policy speech in 2018 had "strategy" but it was omitted from the 2019 speech.

11 Japan's Diplomacy, "Diplomatic Blueprint 2019", Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan. <https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/other/bluebook/2019/html/chapter1/c0102.html#sf01>.

12 "Chinese ships remain in Japanese waters near Senkakus for record time", *The Japan Times*, 13 October 2020. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2020/10/13/national/china-senkakus-record/>.

Republicans and Democrats in the US. Second, Trump's excessive focus on domestic politics distracted the White House from giving due attention to important international issues. Trump's inclination to personalise US diplomacy also allowed North Korea to gain some diplomatic recognition of its nuclear status. However, strategically, Japan-US relations have strengthened in recent years. Both countries recognise that China is the primary threat in the Indo-Pacific and have conducted several naval and military exercises, including the Malabar exercise with India and Australia. More importantly, the Trump administration's aim of a FOIP was inspired by Abe's emphasis on a rules-based regional order, suggesting strong complementarities in their bilateral agenda for the region. During US Vice President Mike Pence's visit to Japan in November 2018, the two countries issued a joint statement on advancing a FOIP through energy, infrastructure and digital connectivity cooperation expanding from security cooperation.

However, there is a perception in Japan that the Trump administration's Indo-Pacific strategy lacked clarity and substance. Firstly, Trump's transactional approach to security partnerships and his demands for strict reciprocity did engender doubts on America's sincerity in containing China while reassuring its allies of its security commitment to the region. For example, Trump threatened to retaliate against countries that would not follow the American diktat on banning Huawei.<sup>13</sup> Secondly, Trump's economic external policy was driven by economic nationalists who prioritised the 'America First' approach and undermined both the liberal economic order and the positives accruing out of economic interdependence. Thirdly, Trump's trade wars with China created major economic difficulties for US allies in the region. The economic repercussions of the Sino-US trade war were also felt in Japan. American economic mercantilism targeted Japan in equal measures with Trump raising tariffs on Japanese automobile exports under the 'America First' economic policy.

*The economic repercussions of the Sino-US trade war were also felt in Japan.*

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13 Julian E. Barnes and Adam Satarian, "U.S. Campaign to Ban Huawei Overseas Stumbles as Allies Resist", *The New York Times*, 17 March 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/17/us/politics/huawei-ban.html>.

Japan would like the Biden administration to maintain America's commitment to its security. The transition of power in Washington is accompanied by a leadership change in Tokyo. Soon after the US presidential election results in November 2020, the newly-appointed Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga spoke with Biden and discussed the importance of the FOIP.<sup>14</sup> Biden has affirmed the US' commitment to Article 5 of the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between the US and Japan and agreed that the treaty extends to the contested Senkaku Islands.<sup>15</sup>

*Japan not only supported ASEAN's Indo-Pacific outlook but also strengthened its maritime relationship with the ASEAN-member countries.*

Tokyo believes that unlike Trump, who had shown little consideration for regional perspectives (not attending the ASEAN summits), Biden is likely to engage more with the regional countries, particularly Southeast Asia. In 2019, ASEAN released an outlook document on the Indo-Pacific. It was considered as an act of diplomatic and political assertion by ASEAN on its centrality to the Indo-Pacific concept.<sup>16</sup> Japan not only supported ASEAN's Indo-Pacific outlook but also strengthened its maritime relationship with the ASEAN-member countries. With Biden's support to the region on maritime cooperation, the US, Japan and the ASEAN-member states can work collectively to secure and safeguard the Indo-Pacific region. Furthermore, Biden administration's greater emphasis on democracy at the time when the Democracy 10 (D10) alliance is gaining steam opens opportunities to collaborate with partners in the region on matters such as digital cooperation and infrastructure.

<sup>14</sup> "Japan PM Suga speaks with Biden, confirms importance of Japan-U.S. ties", *Reuters*, 12 November 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-japan-usa-talks/japan-pm-suga-speaks-with-biden-confirms-importance-of-japan-u-s-ties-idUSKBN27R35U>.

<sup>15</sup> Press Conference by Foreign Minister Motegi Toshimitsu, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 13 November 2020. [https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/kaiken/kaiken3e\\_000028.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/kaiken/kaiken3e_000028.html).

<sup>16</sup> Amitav Acharya, "Why ASEAN's Indo-Pacific Outlook Matters", *East Asia Forum*, 11 August 2019. <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2019/08/11/why-aseans-indo-pacific-outlook-matters/>.

## Conclusion

As the Biden administration takes over the White House, there are three main challenges and expectations.

First, Biden will have to reset America's foreign policy and undo some of the policies championed by the Trump administration. Among such policies are reducing the increasingly polarised domestic politics, addressing the economic disparities accruing out of economic globalisation and addressing the crisis of American leadership in the pandemic-ridden global politics.

Secondly, the Biden administration would have to cogitate over and implement a clear policy on China. The Chinese assertiveness and territorial expansionist policies have demolished the idea of China's "peaceful rise", and most countries in the region are now resetting their China policies and their policy priorities in the Indo-Pacific region in general. As China becomes more assertive in the region, these countries are further remapping their defence strategies and foreign policies, looking to strengthen cooperation with like-minded countries. While Biden's approach of championing US democratic partners and allies to contain China's rise through multilateralism is to be welcomed, Biden would also have to address the fears of entrapment and abandonment among the countries in the Indo-Pacific. One of the major challenges for Biden would be to reassure the Southeast Asian countries of them not being entrapped in a coalition against China if they strengthen ties with the US.

*One of the major challenges for Biden would be to reassure the Southeast Asian countries of them not being entrapped in a coalition against China if they strengthen ties with the US.*

Lastly, the US' engagement in the Indo-Pacific is extremely critical for regional partners. Trump's unpredictable policies raised questions on the US' commitment to the region. The Biden administration is expected to deliver positive developments for the Indo-Pacific region, primarily due to the new administration's emphasis on regional alliances. While the US will have to address the concerns of the Sino-US Cold War for the Southeast Asian nations, it will also need to simultaneously reassure the Quad members that it will take a tough stance on China's defiance of the liberal order and the rule of law in the region.



## Appendix 1 About the Panel Discussion

ISAS-SPF Panel Discussion (Webinar)  
Post-election US Policy toward the Indo-Pacific:  
Expectations and Concerns  
27 November 2020

### Programme

- 10.00am **Panel Discussion**  
**Post-election US Policy toward the Indo-Pacific:  
Expectations and Concerns**  
Chairperson  
**Professor C Raja Mohan**  
Director  
Institute of South Asian Studies  
National University of Singapore
- Panellists  
**Dr Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan**  
Distinguished Fellow and  
Head of the Nuclear and Space Policy Initiative  
Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi
- Mr Tsuneo Watanabe**  
Senior Fellow  
Sasakawa Peace Foundation, Japan
- Mr Drew Thompson**  
Visiting Senior Research Fellow  
Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy  
National University of Singapore
- 10.40am **Discussion Session**
- 11.25am **Closing Remarks**  
**Ms Junko Chano**  
Executive Director  
Sasakawa Peace Foundation, Japan
- 11.30am **End of Session**

## Appendix 2 About the Authors

**Dr Yogesh Joshi** is a Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS) at the National University of Singapore. Before joining ISAS, Dr Joshi was a MacArthur and Stanton Nuclear Postdoctoral Fellow at the Center for International Security and Cooperation, Stanford University, United States (US). He is also an alumnus of Summer Workshop on the Analysis of Military Operations and Strategy, Columbia University and the International Nuclear History Boot Camp, Woodrow Wilson Center. He has a doctorate in International Politics from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

Dr Joshi is co-author of three books: *India and Nuclear Asia: Forces Doctrines and Dangers* (Georgetown University Press, 2018); *Asia's Emerging Balance of Power: The US 'Pivot' and Indian Foreign Policy* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); and *India's Nuclear Policy: A Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2018). His research has been published in *Survival*, *Asian Security*, *India Review*, *US Naval War College Review*, *International Affairs*, *Contemporary Security Policy*, *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, *Asia Policy*, *International History Review* and *Harvard Asia Quarterly*.

Dr Joshi's research focuses on contemporary Indian foreign and national security policy, with an emphasis on the Indo-Pacific's balance of power, evolution of India's military power and its approach to the use of force in international relations.

**Ms Archana Atmakuri** is a Research Analyst at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS) at the National University of Singapore. She graduated with a Master's degree in International Relations from the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

Ms Atmakuri's research interests are India and China's foreign policy in South Asia, great power rivalry and political communication which deals with fake news and misinformation. She has published several commentaries on these themes.

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