

What will Australia and Japan want from Joe Biden?

by John McCarthy

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Japan is our most important interlocutor in Asia. They may also hold the key to a different attitude to the region in Beijing.

Scott Morrison's foreign policy initiatives usually suggest determination rather than calibration.

But today's visit to Tokyo is notable for both. In the time of COVID-19, it is gutsy in domestic terms – and considered international policy.

The visit will matter to Japan. Given Morrison will be the first national leader to visit Japan since February and to be received by the new prime minister, [Yoshihide Suga](#), it will have totemic as well as substantive salience.

The agreement to the text of a Status of Forces Agreement reinforces the trend over recent years by which Japan and Australia have come to see each other as security partners in our own right rather than as joined by security connections in common with the United States.

The visit should also help further develop commonality of perspective with Japan on how best to deal not only with China, but with the United States.

Historically Australian diplomacy has attached primacy to exchanging views with the United States on Asia. Since the lack of follow-through on president Barack Obama's pivot to Asia, and latterly the quixotic behaviour of the Trump regime, it has made equal – and arguably more-sense to talk to the Asians about the United States. Our most important interlocutor is Japan.

What then should we both do about the Biden era?

We do not, as is sometimes suggested, need to enjoin President-elect Joe Biden to keep the faith with his allies or to [stand firm on China](#). He has attached priority to both these things. We should also recognise the challenges for Biden of putting the United States' house in order, and the significance to the Americans not only of security issues in Asia, but in Europe.

There are two central themes both countries should have in mind in addressing Washington.

Most of the messages coming from the Democrats' foreign and security policy community show a determination to contest China where American interests so dictate. They also indicate a much more structured approach to policy than under Donald Trump, and a preparedness to cooperate with China in areas of mutual benefit such as health, nuclear non-proliferation and climate.

If this sort of thinking develops into policy, it makes sense to encourage Biden towards receptivity to indications, should they come, of a Chinese desire to wind back tensions. Here, Japanese thinking is almost certainly more nuanced than our own. While rigorous on adherence to the security relationship with the United States, there is more two-way flexibility in Japan's dealings with China.

The second theme is the importance of holistic American engagement in Southeast Asia. This is because at the end of the day, Chinese regional ambition will be constrained as much by Southeast Asian attitudes as by the defensive measures of the United States and its close allies, through, for example, the Quad structure or recent moves to give policy relevance to the Anglosphere's Five Eyes intelligence grouping.

With the historic exception of the Vietnam era and possibly the mid –sixties in Indonesia, the United States' primary regional strategic focus since World War II has been on Northeast Asia, not Southeast Asia.

Over the last four years, and even earlier, [the sense of American neglect of this region has deepened.](#)

This is a partly because of diplomatic inertia – not showing up at the big Asia-Pacific events, partly because of the decline in American economic engagement in Southeast Asia as epitomised by the failure of Donald Trump to proceed with the [TransPacific Partnership](#), and partly because of loss of respect for Trump's America.

It makes little sense to seek to have the Southeast Asians think about China the same way that Japan, India or Australia do. They won't. They welcome a continued American strategic presence to balance China. But they will not openly side against China. If they are to adopt strategic postures generally consistent with our interests, it will not be because of the inane bellows of the likes of US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo, but because of sustained diplomatic engagement.

Such a process will be complex. The Southeast Asians do not think alike. The United States will have to balance the importance it attaches to governance issues in some countries such as the Philippines or Thailand against strategic factors. It will have to

think about the politics of trade, including the vexed issue of reviving interest in the TPP, particularly in Congress.

Japan is better placed than any other country to argue the Southeast Asian case in Washington. Abe gave priority to the region and Suga's first two overseas visits were to Vietnam and Indonesia. Various surveys indicate that Japan is the most respected major power in Southeast Asia – far ahead of either China or the United States

It is a pity that in recent years Australia has reduced our technical assistance to the region, and hence our locus standi in encouraging greater United States engagement there. Let us hope that our recent decisions on a \$1.5 billion loan to Indonesia, and on increased assistance elsewhere in South East Asia herald a change from the parsimony of recent years.

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