

# Biden and South East Asia

by **John McCarthy**

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Three weeks after the election, there is plenty of evidence that Biden and the emerging Democrat foreign policy team in-waiting appreciate the strategic challenges facing President Elect Biden both in Europe and the Indo-Pacific.

They have stressed rehabilitation of the multilateral system, the strengthening traditional alliances and determination to stand up to both Russia and China.

Biden demonstrated his bona fides by early calls to key allies in Europe and the following day to leaders in Japan, South Korea and Australia. In his talk with Japanese Prime Minister Suga, he reaffirmed that the United States alliance commitment covered the disputed Senkaku islands – a crucial Japanese concern.

But the new administration will need rapidly to take its thinking on Asia one step further.

Since WW2, the United States primary focus in Asia, has been, with the exception of the Vietnam era, on Northeast Asia, where the interests of Asia's major powers intersect.

If the United States is effectively to constrain the more adverse effects of China's rise, it must now place equal weight on Southeast Asia.

America's main regional allies, Japan, South Korea and Australia are not about to jump the alliance coop. For different reasons their alliances with the United States are central to their security policies.

The Southeast Asians think differently. They want strategic autonomy and flexibility in dealings with both the United States and China. And it is here that the United States must compete with China for influence.

The new United States Administration needs to think about four things.

– **First**, Woody Allan's adage that "eighty percent of success is showing up" applies in spades. Trump and his senior team willfully or negligently did not show up in Southeast Asian gatherings. ASEAN meetings – and the others that surround them, like the East Asia Forum or APEC, are not ecstatic affairs but the dull, thudding engines of Asian

diplomacy. The highest levels of the Administration need to attend these forums, not merely assistant secretaries of State and admirals from Honolulu.

– **Second**, the importance of economic engagement. In mid year, Biden wrote that “economic security is national security”. It is only a minor extension of this perspective to suggest that international economic policy has a strong strategic component. Security relies on butter as well as guns. In terms of economic presence, the United States is behind the game. For example, ASEAN has now overtaken the EU and the United States as China’s largest trading partner.

The recently concluded Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (the ASEAN nations, China, Japan and South Korea) covers about 30 percent of the global population and 30 percent of global GDP. However India’s last minute failure to join means it will tend to be dominated by China.

President Trump wasted little time in excluding the United States from the competing (or complementary) grouping, the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) covering some Asian countries (not China) and some western hemisphere countries. This decision could be changed by Biden, but he will have to deal with significant opposition in Congress, and from within his own party. This will take time to overcome.

There is also a case for the United States to ease up on some of its bilateral trade disputes, including with Thailand and Vietnam.

– **Third**, policies will have to be calibrated as between the various Southeast Asian countries. Probably all – even Cambodia – favour a continued United States strategic presence, but have differing views on China. The soft power of the latter has diminished in recent years as much as that of the United States under Trump. But Cambodia, Laos, and probably Myanmar, tilt towards China. Indonesia Thailand and Singapore do not want to choose. The Philippines wants American proximity when it feels vulnerable. Vietnam attaches real importance to a strong United States’ strategic presence.

– **Fourth**, a Democrat Administration will inevitably attach importance to governance and values. This approach could affect dealings with most of the Southeast Asian countries and the Modi government in India. It is a problem these countries did not have with Trump and do not have with China. American approaches will require balance between meeting American security and economic requirements, and the demands of a values based foreign policy.

Trump largely neglected Southeast Asia, but disruptive as he was to effective diplomacy everywhere, he is not alone to blame for this neglect. Despite Obama’s “Pivot to Asia”, Southeast Asia has traditionally failed to attract the level of interest and activity in American policy circles accorded to Northeast Asia, the Middle east or

Europe. Biden needs to change this, opening the door to deeper and smarter American engagement with Southeast Asia. Otherwise he risks ceding a decisive edge to China in the contest for regional influence.

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