

Shared burden of a new vision for the Asia Pacific

by **Nick Bisley**

East Asia Forum, 23 March 2021

Link: <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2021/03/23/shared-burden-of-a-new-vision-for-the-asia-pacific/>

The relief is palpable. After four years, Washington's Asian allies have got what they hope is their old partner back. US President Joe Biden won't [shake down](#) Japan and South Korea, [hector](#) Australian prime ministers or [fawn](#) over Chinese President Xi Jinping's strongman tactics.

Yet the eagerly anticipated return to normality will not be a reversion to the status quo ante. Each ally in the region is concerned not just with how the 46th president will approach their bilateral relationship, but also with the broader question of Biden's strategy toward the region.

For Australia, this is a highly consequential period. Its Asia strategy [lacks coherence](#). It upended a long-term approach of developing positive relations with all the major regional powers by shifting to a confrontational approach to the People's Republic of China (PRC) without a risk mitigation plan or substantive support from Washington. Given the centrality of the US alliance, the direction Biden takes will be critical to Australia's ability to chart a successful foreign policy over the coming years. In the lead up to the US-China summit in Alaska, Kurt Campbell [revealed](#) the kind of support the Biden administration will provide Australia in its dealings with China, which, if sustained, will be of significant benefit to Canberra.

In contrast to Trump, Biden is likely to have an Asia strategy worthy of the name. While the 45th president and his secretaries spoke regularly about the ['free and open Indo-Pacific'](#), what that actually meant was unclear. Exactly what Biden will seek to do is not yet finalised, however, Kurt Campbell and Rush Doshi, now both key figures in Biden's National Security Council (NSC), set out a [blueprint](#) for Washington's Asia strategy: to preserve what they call the 'regional operating system'.

Their approach is based on the Kissingerian belief that stable regional orders must rest on a balance of power and a shared sense of legitimacy about the order and its purpose. The implication is that US strategy in Asia should seek to ensure a stable military balance and a shared sense of order. The problem is

how to square this with an ambitious and assertive China whose view is not compatible with this vision.

A neo-Kissingerian view requires giving China at least some space and legitimacy, an idea at odds with the language of US officials who intend to retain Trump's hard-line posture.

The question is whether Biden's ambition is to defend the regional status quo — to maintain US primacy in the face of mounting Chinese power — or to adjust the broader setting. Here, [domestic politics](#) are likely to prevail: the defence of the old will probably remain the United States' long-term ambition. This may prompt a much more competitive and combustible regional dynamic than the kind sketched by Campbell and Doshi.

The role of regional institutions and alliances will also change. Where Trump saw alliances as a liability, Biden's team will see them as an asset — as order stabilisers, force multipliers and legitimacy anchors. Allies will be expected to play a greater role in establishing a new equilibrium of force, as well as in driving a shared sense of legitimacy among countries in the region.

The discordant messages allies received from the disparate voices of the Trump administration will be no more, and alliances will be more prized. But Washington will increasingly expect its partners to carry a greater burden in the overall strategy than in the past. This will test the alignment between the US vision for the region and the interests of its alliance partners.

One of the central challenges for the United States is the growing disjuncture between the region's geopolitics and its economic relations. Washington's former primacy was based on the close fit between economic and strategic interests that existed for most countries. China's emergence and the broader transformation of Asia's trade and investment patterns has ended that.

Former president Barack Obama's Asia policy tried to address this, principally through the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). Trump scuppered the TPP and launched a trade war on China. This began a process of decoupling the world's two biggest economies, making the task of aligning the economic and the strategic extremely difficult.

How the Biden administration approaches decoupling and trade policy towards China [will be hugely consequential](#). Biden's team has staff who recognise the complexity of this challenge, but domestic politics again could prevent shrewd management. It is difficult to see Biden having the political space to join the TPP's successor, the CPTPP, or take meaningful steps to reduce Beijing's

economic influence in the region, particularly with Secretary [Blinken](#) [emphasising](#) the need to ensure US foreign policy serves the interests of America's middle class.

Australia will welcome the new administration, notwithstanding the [uncertainty around economic affairs](#). Yet the reality that Australia faces a much riskier international environment remains. So does the expectation that its close friend in Washington wants it to shoulder more responsibility and risk.

Strategic competition with China over Asia's order will be the dominant feature of the coming years. While that competition is likely to be better managed under Biden, a region dominated by competing great powers is a dangerous one indeed.

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