

# The Biden-Suga agreement shows the importance of the Western Pacific

by John McCarthy

*John Menadue's Blog, Pearls and Irritations, 27 April 2021*

Link:

<https://johnmenadue.com/the-biden-suga-agreement-shows-the-importance-of-the-western-pacific/>

*The primary importance of the Biden-Suga summit is that Mr Suga was the first foreign leader to be received by President Biden in Washington. The second such visitor will be President Moon of South Korea – not Britain's Boris Johnson or Germany's Angela Merkel. Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is nowhere in sight.*

From 1945 until the end of the Cold War, the United States global competitor was the Soviet Union. The main arena for competition was Europe and the Atlantic—even taking into account Vietnam and constant tensions in Northeast Asia.

In the 90s, the United States enjoyed its unipolar moment.

From 9/11 until this month's announcement that American forces will leave Afghanistan on 9/11 this year, the dominant American external focus has been on the circumstances stemming from 9/11: Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria – and the contribution of these wars to a changed balance of forces in the broader Middle East.

With a new administration methodically laying out a new foreign policy, the Americans have now signalled unequivocally that their geopolitical priority is the Indo Pacific.

Most in Australia – from the anti-China hawks to those who see a continued strong American strategic presence as important to regional stability – will welcome this signal. But we should bear in mind that while many in this country may not look far beyond Covid-19 and China, the Americans do not have the same luxury.

While the Biden administration is a new dawn after the dog years of President Trump, its advent cannot disguise the depth of the United States' preoccupations.

Much of the paperwork of the summit, which was not in the headlines, was not on China but about Covid-19 and Climate Change. And then there is the home front – including again Covid-19 plus the economy, refugees and race, just to start.

Moreover, while the American withdrawal from Afghanistan may be a welcome wipe of the slate, Taliban preponderance will further unsettle a region in which the United States' reputation has dwindled in recent years. If Afghanistan – or most of it – goes, as with the fall of Saigon, so too will much of remaining respect in which the United States is held in the broader Middle East and beyond.

And on his border with Ukraine, Mr Putin is not being backward in coming forward.

The second takeaway from the summit for Australia is that it reinforces the significance of Japanese policy for our own approach to China.

Media coverage of the summit has emphasized that in the Japan-US communiqué, Japan, at the leader's level for the first time since 1969, referred to Taiwan. It acknowledged the "importance of peace and stability in the Taiwan strait".

In the finely tuned language of Head of Government communiqués, this wording was an important change – reportedly important enough to worry the more dovish elements in Kasumigaseki – Tokyo's Whitehall.

But then the Taiwan situation is probably more serious than it ever has been – even at the low point in 1996 ; the language is hardly a call to arms, and it had in any event been used a few weeks earlier at foreign and defence minister level. It is a long way from Biden's "rock solid" if still ambiguous commitment to Taiwan.

For a country with more pressing security concerns about China than our own, but which still holds out hopes for a modus vivendi – albeit an uneasy one – with its immediate neighbour, Japan got things pretty right.

Without prejudice to the alliance of either of our countries with the United States, Australia's long term strategic interest in managing a more adventurist China is closer to that of Japan than to that of the United States. This is because of where we are as part of the Western Pacific. This appreciation should become more central to our Indo-pacific policy.

*John McCarthy AO is a senior advisor to Asialink and former Australian Ambassador to the United States, Indonesia and Japan, and High Commissioner to India. He is also an Associate of China Matters.*