



INDO-JAPAN CHAMBER OF COMMERCE & INDUSTRY

Waiting for Joseph Biden: A welcome change for India, Japan and Indo Pacific ?

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PREFACE

The year 2020 has brought tremendous pressure for countries all over the world. No doubt 'Covid' is a high priority issue but the Indo-Pacific challenge assumes the order of a high priority too. How are the two leaders of Japan and India ably and swiftly going to address this issue? Will Japan be aggressive enough? Will the support of the new Biden administration in the United States help resolve the issue? Will there will be a well orchestrated quadrilateral Japan-India-Australia and the US join to combat this issue and many others to bring about peace and prosperity in the region are questions daunting all of us. The author Dr. Sridhar Krishnaswami, without any prejudice, has boldly enumerated the issues of concern. He is highly optimistic that President Biden with his rich experience and vision and with the support of his administration will set the order of priority to combat terrorist activities in the region and beyond.

A few lines about the author:

Dr. Sridhar Krishnaswami is a Deputy Dean of the College of Science and Humanities, SRM Institute of Science and Technology and Professor in the Dept. of Journalism and Mass Communications and the Special Assistant to the Vice Chancellor of SRMIST. He has been a Journalist for 25 years - 18 years he was a Foreign Correspondent in Washington DC—ten years with The Hindu in charge of South East Asia and the Asia Pacific and four years he was with The Press Trust of India in Washington D.C. Prior to his overseas assignments with The Hindu he was for seven years the newspaper's Editorial Writer on foreign affairs based in Chennai. Dr. Krishnaswami has a Ph.D in Political Science from the Miami University of Ohio (USA) specializing in International Relations, International Law and Organization, and Comparative Politics (East Asian Political Systems—China and Japan). He holds a Master's Degree in International Affairs from Ohio University (USA), with a concentration in South East Asia, and a Master's Degree in Political Science from the University of Madras (Presidency College). His Bachelor's Degree is in Political Science from the University of Madras (Madras Christian College).

Dr. Krishnaswami was a Professional Fellow with The Japan Foundation, Tokyo, and a Journalist Fellow with The Foreign Press Center of Japan in Tokyo, and recipient of The Radio Tampa Broadcasting Award of Japan (Japan Shortwave Broadcasting Corporation) for his writings in The Hindu on the Asia-Pacific and Oceania. Dr. Sridhar Krishnaswami contributes articles to scholarly journals and media publications and is currently a Member of the Governing Council of the Indo Japan Chamber of Commerce and Industry guiding the Chamber in its activities.

Hope readers would find the resource material interesting and informative.

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If one were to look at the last twelve months of 2020, two major events have stood out and in different degrees of impact: the coronavirus that has ravaged and savaged the international system taking a toll of more than 1.5 million lives besides infecting some 16 millions globally; and towards the close of this “eventful” year, was the American election where the 45th President, Donald J Trump, contested the verdict which essentially put on hold the transition process for about two weeks. Trump and his administration will leave the scheme of things at Noon on January 20, 2021 paving the way for President Joseph Biden and his Vice President Kamala Harris at the helm of affairs.

To those interested in foreign policy, be it academics or policy makers, it is not just of asking the question whether

the outcome of the American election was welcoming the exit of the incumbent or relief at the entry of a new dispensation with a man who is all too familiar to the ways of Washington DC for the simple fact that he was a part of the legislative process for over four decades. Add to this the fact that Joseph Biden brings with him eight years of being President Barack Obama's Vice President. So, would allies and adversaries see something new in a new Biden administration or be quietly resigned to a perception that it is more likely to be a continuation of the Obama administration of eight years between 2008 and 2016? Either way that would put some ease or unease in capitals of Indo Pacific, notably China and Japan.

It is easy to talk about continuity and change in foreign policy, but difficult to draw the line between where policy remains and change begins. Generally practitioners of foreign policy will maintain that it is quite difficult to change the broad contours of foreign policy abruptly, but somewhat easier to make mid-course corrections to start with. In the case of the four years of Trump administration, some of the staunchest allies in the West and in the Asia Pacific have taken issue with Washington on a number of things like Climate Change, World Health Organisation, United Nations Human Rights Commission, to mention a few.

In macro terms the incoming Biden dispensation has made it clear that America will be back on the global map. Getting

back to the Iranian nuclear deal will be a more difficult proposition for the simple reason that Teheran is said to have made some rapid advances in its program since the United States walked out of the deal in 2018 much against the advice of European allies. The assassination of Iranian Major General Soleimani at the beginning of 2019 and the recent killing of the country's respected nuclear scientist have complicated the situation.

On the one hand the Indo Pacific, that has the presence of some heavy hitters like India, Japan, China and Australia, may seem like a different cup of tea and quite divorced from the realities of Europe and the Middle East. Some in this region would be disappointed that President Trump is leaving the scene for he was seen as one of the very few leaders of the West who showed a tough line on China, a country that was increasingly seen as being belligerent and refusing to play the rules of the international game. Here again while countries like India and Australia may have been quietly happy of the toughened rhetoric on the security/strategic fronts, Japan was quietly frowning that Washington's threatened or imposed tariffs on high tech goods and the potential of cutting off Chinese companies in the 5G and digital scheme of things that could have an adverse bearing on Japanese exports to China.

Call it strategic competition or strategic confrontation, the Trump administration's tough approach on communication

technologies vis-à-vis Beijing did raise some eyebrows in the Indo Pacific and beyond; and it remains to be seen if the Biden foreign policy team is prepared to go along, modify or up the ante in Washington's dealings with China. It is being pointed out that the top foreign policy team of the incoming Biden administration consists of first rate seasoned bureaucrats and policy makers.

Speaking of the incoming foreign policy team of Biden, P.J. Crowley, former Assistant Secretary of State, says "This is not a team of rivals. While they have a history of working well together, they will also bring complementary perspectives to the Situation Room, with hands-on experience in global conflicts. The value of strategic coherence will outweigh any potential for groupthink. They are not card-carrying members of a deep state, but will help lead a more effective American state focused on shared interests and values. They are pragmatists, not ideologues". What had hampered a Trump administration's foreign policy both in Europe and in the Indo Pacific is a lack of clear sighted goals; and some of this has been attributed to frequent shifting of the key players at the State Department and National Security Council.

Fortunately for India, it was a good run of four years with a Republican administration that was seen extremely supportive of New Delhi's security and strategic compulsions. Bilateral relations that has seen a steady

upswing since 2000 continued to flourish under President Trump with the personal equations between Trump and the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi described as very good and extremely cordial. In fact there is a perception that Republican administrations are better for India in that they are focused on larger strategic matters as opposed to Democrats who bring with them the baggage of human rights and non-proliferation. But in the last twenty years bilateral relations have flourished in spite of occasional brushes on the economic and human rights front; and a Republican Congress under President Trump has not been any lenient on issues of human rights and religious freedom.

In ways more than one New Delhi must be looking forward to the new administration and very little of this will have to do with the fact that Vice President Kamala Harris is of Indian descent. While it makes the country and its people proud, no one is under any illusions of any special treatment on account of this. The Biden-Harris team will play by what is best for American national interests even while consciously factoring in the concerns of allies in the Indo Pacific. The strategic equation between India and the United States is bound to grow, much beyond the trilateral or the Quadilateral dialogues and military exercises. While strengthening political bonds could be a bilateral issue, fine tuning the strategic and economic components are essentially a multilateral business with Washington, New

Delhi and Tokyo having to factor in each other's interests and compulsions, bilaterally and multilaterally.

The incoming Biden administration is aware of the complexities of the Indo Pacific region even if some like China in that part of the world would prefer to name it Asia Pacific as Beijing would want to have its centrality in any scheme of things. And there are a few in Europe and Asia who are yet to commit themselves precisely as to what they would consider as the Indo Pacific. But look at the irony: The APEC, Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation Forum, a group of 21 countries does not include India. And one of the rationales is that India's borders do not touch the Pacific Ocean. Here the fact that India is in a part of the world called Asia does not seem to matter! In the last few years Indo Pacific has gained currency and not without good reasons. Aside from big players that include the United States the regional has also powerful organizations like the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). Smaller nation states but with good economic, military and political clout have increasingly found ways to voice concerns and pushing for solutions to issues confronting the region - strategic, economic and environmental, to mention a few.

India, China and Japan are heavily dependent on the Indo-Pacific sea lanes for trade and energy supplies and it is being pointed out that two-thirds of container trade passes through this area. Further more than 50 per cent of the global

population is accounted by the Indo Pacific; India and China together account for more than 2.5 billion people; and the region also is home to rich mineral and marine resources. The Indo Pacific region has attracted so much attention that the United States in 2018 renamed its Pacific Command as Indo-Pacific Command. Basically every one of the countries in this Indo-Pacific region is looking for a rules-based order that will preside over issues, especially the contentious ones. And this is precisely the point of worry of several nations in the Indo Pacific and beyond who cringe at the fact that some like China insist on not playing by the rule book of international laws, especially as it pertains to navigation in the high seas.

Looking at the evolving relations between India and Japan in the last decade or so, it is undoubtedly on the upward trajectory. At the same time there is the realization that the challenges faced by the two countries in the Indo Pacific are somewhat unique and different that the incoming administration would have to consciously keep in mind and no fall for the temptation of mechanically comparing the two different sets of compulsions. For India it is in an immediate neighbor, Pakistan, a state that is tottering economically and politically and on the verge of once again passing on to the hands of the brass hats. And it is a state that continually harps on the use of nuclear weapons, something that no responsible or rational nation would do. Even at the

height of the Cold War, neither the United States nor the erstwhile Soviet Union openly bragged on the potential use of nuclear weapons. In South Asia, India has to face a nearly failed state, a state that is the epi-center of global terrorism and a state that takes pride in fomenting terrorism across the border. In many ways a failed state of Pakistan would be a threat not only to India but to the Indo-Pacific region as a whole for the simple reason that its nuclear weapons might fall into the hands of terrorists and jihadists - a nightmare scenario that has implications for the whole region.

If India has to contend with Pakistan, Japan has to do deal with Chairman Kim Jong Un in North Korea who would seem to be in competition with the politicians and Generals in Pakistan in talking about using nuclear weapons and missiles. In fact Chairman Kim has gone one step further - he has shot off missiles in the Sea of Japan and has threatened Washington of unleashing long range missiles against American cities. China which is the only country to support Pyongyang is watching the North Korean drama with a lot of unease. There is no telling for Japan if indeed Chairman Kim starts an offensive in the region that will not be confined to the Koreas but involve the Indo Pacific and the world at large. President Trump has often times openly boasted of his skills in bringing Pyongyang to the table and mocked at his Democratic predecessor of failing to do so. But three rounds of summit with Chairman Kim has yielded

practically nothing with President Trump adamantly refusing for a partial lifting of economic sanctions. Japan will be keen on seeing how a Biden administration will approach Chairman Kim; whether the new administration would seek to go along with Pyongyang or bring in other nations such as China, Russia, Japan and South Korea to the table for any breakthrough.

But the zillion dollar question is that of China and in the extent to which President Biden is going to play the game that will factor in the interests of the United States and the Indo Pacific, especially countries like Japan and India that have seen a lot of run-ins with China of late and militarily so. One argument has been that Washington under President Trump had been so keen on punishing the Chinese economically that it practically gave Beijing a free ride on issues of security and strategic concerns. And this has prompted China to start border skirmishes with India in the Leh/ Ladakh/ Galwan Valley and needling Japan over the Senkakus. So brazen has been China that it has sent warships into the exclusive economic zone of Japan. Further strategic analysts and policy makers have made the point that tensions are only bound to sharpen in the context of the so-called “Blue Economy” where nations like China jockey to convert Oceans for wealth extraction by way of deep sea bed mining.

The leadership in Tokyo may be calmed to an extent to find that President Biden is in line with Article 5 of the Mutual

Security Treaty with Japan that talks of U.S. involvement in the event of a showdown; but some others in Japan have long been wary that specifics of the extent of involvement are lacking. In a first telephone conversation with the Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga, Biden is said to have affirmed that the Security Treaty covers the Senkaku Islands in the East China Seas which are claimed by China. Essentially this is a reaffirmation of the statement of the then President Barack Obama on a visit to Japan in 2014. The latest observations of Biden is seen as a signal to China that has been continuously provoking Tokyo by sending coast guard vessels into Japanese territorial waters in flagrant violation of international norms.

Occasionally Democratic and Republican administration have been bandying around the concept of a “free ride” on defence by Japan, an issue that was brought to the fore by President Trump not just with Japan but also America’s allies in Europe and the Indo Pacific to include South Korea. A Biden administration will also be pressing Tokyo to define the role of its Self Defence Forces in the event of a military showdown given a thinking in Washington and elsewhere that Japan is punching well below its weight when it comes to matters of defence. The problem for the government in Tokyo is not just internal opposition to abandoning the Peace Constitution, but also of neighboring countries in East and South East Asia who remain wary of Japan given what

transpired in the Second World War. Biden is expected to keep the heat on Japan for its trade surpluses, but Tokyo is convinced that Washington will also take a larger look at the issue instead of pegging it to one or two sectors of the imbalance.

India, Japan and the United States are also concerned about China's aggressive posturing in the South China Seas as it threatens freedom of the high seas. In fact discarding all norms, Beijing has sought to claim exclusive zones in the South and East China Seas not permitted by international laws, something that many in the region are not willing to subscribe easily. And the dispute over the Spratlys has seen China militarizing those small islands and islets; and countries in the ASEAN are looking at ways to draw up rules of conduct that seem so elusive in the face of an obstinate China maintaining its "sovereign" rights in the area that is seen to be rich in oil and natural gas reserves, thus far fully unexplored.

With Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines and Malaysia also claiming the islands group, in whole or in part, South China Seas is seen as a potential flashpoint. The big question is if the countries opposing China have the wherewithal to stand up to Beijing and if the United States would get involved in the showdown. Whether it has to do with freedom of navigation or asserting territorial jurisdiction, nations in the Indo Pacific are facing a dilemma: going by international

laws and established conventions or a show of force in which smaller states may be disadvantaged militarily upping the ante against China.

And the strategic environment of India as it pertains to the Indo Pacific is no less challenging. The “noise” within the neighborhood aside, New Delhi has had to deal with China over its String of Pearls strategy, the inroads of Beijing in Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal, Maldives and Mauritius, not to speak of the continuous and ever growing nexus with Pakistan. The persisting border dispute with China is one irritant that will remain absorbing for India’s leaders, but now New Delhi will have to answer the aggressive challenge of Beijing in international waterways such as the South China Seas. All this is not to forget China’s Belt Road Initiative that is central to improving its influence in the region; and following the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, Beijing is nearing finalization of a China-Myanmar Economic Corridor with perhaps more such to follow in and around the neighborhood.

India and Japan cannot be passive spectators to the goings on and for all practical purposes China seems to be the bottom line or the “center” of tensions for many countries in this expanded region whether they wished to admit that in open or not. The problem for New Delhi and Tokyo as far as the future of the American role in the Indo Pacific is in the unknown—the extent to which Washington is going to be

committed in strategic reach and financial commitment. For a country that was drawn into the Mutual Security Treaty with the United States since the early 1950s, during the Cold War the Japanese were worried that they were going to be dragged into the anti-communist crusades of the United States that manifested itself in a very large way by the Vietnam War.

But the end of the Cold War and the rising belligerence of China - and by extension North Korea - from the late 1990s led to a feeling in Washington that the United States may be drawn into the problems of Japan. But the American draw down in the Indo Pacific has been promptly filled by China—a naval base in Djibouti in the Horn of Africa, access to Hambantota in Sri Lanka, Gwadar port in Pakistan and muscling its way through to control the Kyaukpyu port in Myanmar. These are some of the challenges that the leadership in India and Japan need to address and urgently at that.

And for a country that is facing an economic slowdown for many years, Japan will every and now and then continue to be taunted with getting a “free ride” on defence spending—a faulty perception that dates back to the 1970s and 1980s and one that has been raised frequently by President Donald Trump. The big question is if Washington under President Biden is going to aggressively counter China in the Indo Pacific as it would have to retain the existing force structure, if not substantially add on to the existing capabilities. Also if

Washington is keen on taking on China in this region it should be ready to financially squeeze Beijing by forcing it to spend more on military and consequently less on development programs and in the process making the choice difficult.

The United States is not the only game-changer in the Indo Pacific. China is seeing with concern a change in Moscow's attitude towards Tokyo as well. The dispute over the Kurils is not going to be settled overnight but there are indications that the two countries are looking beyond the short term. The changed relations between the United States, Russia and Japan will undoubtedly benefit the Indo Pacific and in the process strengthen the political hands of India and Japan in dealing with any rising ambitions of China in the region. Beijing will increasingly find it difficult to push its aggressive posturing as it will find others equally willing to stand tough and principled to outrageous unilateral demands. The flip side to this scenario is a sense of wariness in parts of the region of a China-Russia- Iran trio coming together as some sort of a balancer to United States, India, Japan and Australia.

It has to be borne in mind that anything to do with the Indo Pacific has to involve the United States and the regional projection of Washington will depend some extent on the kind of relationships the administration in Washington seeks to establish with individual states in the area. There was a

time when the United States was a dominant actor in the area, politically and strategically; and even today it is perhaps the only power that has the extent and reach and in more than one theatre at a time. Undoubtedly there are shared interests and common concerns in the Indo Pacific and democratic nations in the area like the United States, Japan, India and Australia have a lot of unease by the aggressive posturing of China. With this unease also comes the realization that perhaps the time has come to put the heads and resources together and make a stand that shows resolve.

In the days of the Cold War, the doctrine of Containment was actively bandied about in the United States for ways to keep a check on the then Soviet Union. But containment as conceived originally was meant to bring the Soviet Union into a web of arrangements so that breaking out would be too costly to Moscow. Unfortunately as it worked out containment essentially turned into a military containment of the Soviet Union which proved too costly and the price of which is still being paid by way of a nuclear arms race. Hopefully the Biden administration along with its allies in Indo Pacific will evolve a policy of managing relations with an emergent China. Biden has to send an unmistakable signal to the leadership in Beijing that international relations and diplomatic behavior is rules based; and there is a heavy price to pay for breaking out, not just a slap on the wrist.

A lot of hope is placed in the Indo Pacific especially by key players on the Biden administration moving away from a policy of unilateralism to one of multilateralism. But with this hope also comes a realistic assessment that the incoming Democratic administration will be more focused on domestic priorities such as in an urgent need to address the pandemic that has come to have a bearing on all fifty states of the country. Along with this first priority Biden and his team will also have the daunting task of unifying America that has been torn apart by divisive policies and attitudes. In the realm of foreign policy, Coherence is what nations are waiting for!





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