

VOLUME 3 | ISSUE 7 | OCTOBER 28, 2020

RESOLVED: Joe Biden Would be Good for Japan



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FROM THE EDITOR

As a nation on the front lines of multiple policy challenges in Asia that considers the alliance with the United States the cornerstone of its foreign policy, Japan is scrutinizing the U.S. presidential election and its potential implications for U.S.-Japan relations, from bilateral security and economic cooperation to managing the rise of China.

In the eighteenth issue of the Debating Japan newsletter series, the CSIS Japan Chair invited Dr. Toshihiro Nakayama, Professor, Faculty of Policy Management, Keio University, and Dr. Kunihiro Miyake, President of the Foreign Policy Institute, to share their perspectives on the U.S. presidential campaign. While the two contributors reached careful conclusions about who would be better for Japan, they did an excellent job highlighting the hopes and concerns in Japan about both candidates.



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Japan was able to manage the “Trump shock” quite successfully because of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s decision to embrace President Donald Trump without any hesitation. Although there were surprises, the three-and-a-half years of the Shinzo-Donald era were unexpectedly stable, especially if you take into account candidate Trump’s position on Japan in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. The Trump administration’s tough position on China has been a relief for Japan because during the Obama administration, Japan was always speculating about whether the United States took seriously the “China challenge” and worried that it would end up treating China as a partner rather than a challenger.

Because of this, many have argued that though the Trump administration might be erratic at times, its insistence on the importance of great power competition and its determination not to back off from this challenge leaves Japan with no other option but to side with Trump. This is not necessarily a dominant view in Japan, but a sizable number of people would choose this position, despite their reluctance.

However, I think this view is too myopic. Japan-U.S. relations do not exist in a vacuum and the relationship’s mission is not solely to counter the China challenge. For the Japan-U.S. alliance to function properly, U.S. credibility must be strong, and its actions must be seen as legitimate from other countries’ perspectives.

Coping with the China challenge is no doubt the most important issue on the agenda. However, if the China challenge is to be systemic in nature and will extend into the future, there has to be a stable and a durable domestic consensus in the United States to deal with the challenge.

During the Cold War, the United States forged a “vital center consensus” represented by presidents like Harry S. Truman and John F. Kennedy. This “politics stops at the water’s edge” mentality is what made U.S. action credible and sustainable. Today, the vital center

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Although the 2020 U.S. election cycle is coming to an end soon, none of us seems to be sure about the winner of the U.S. presidential election this year. All U.S. allies in the world are holding their breath and keeping their fingers crossed.

As for Japan, conservatives are more concerned about a Biden administration in 2021. It is partly due to their bitter memories of a Japan “being often made light of,” if not neglected, by the previous Democratic administrations in the past three decades.

Even moderate Japanese seriously wonder if a Biden national security team might revert to a traditional policy of “being too soft” on China. Tokyo vividly remembers the Obama administration’s tilt toward Beijing’s “New Model of Major Power Relations.”

Many Democrats in Washington D.C. strongly disagree, claiming that the United States now faces serious economic, political, and military challenges from China and that Washington must work together with Japan and other allies in the region.

What concerns conservative Japanese most is the Democrats’ persistent emphasis on global issues such as climate change, with which the United States desperately needs Beijing’s cooperation as well as contribution to effectively reduce greenhouse emissions.

Tokyo’s worry is that a Biden administration might try to make a big deal on climate change at the expense of Washington’s alliance partners in East Asia. Many in Tokyo know that Beijing has been quite skillful in such ‘divide-and-rule’ tactics.

Arguably, some Democratic policymakers had naivete vis-à-vis China in the past. It is noteworthy, however, that the Obama administration’s second term started to change the course of Washington’s foreign policy vis-à-vis Beijing.

has evaporated, and we see partisan politics destroying the consensus around working with allies and partners to tackle global challenges.

We need the U.S. political system to function properly, for the vital center consensus to somehow recover. And this can be achieved only through a healthy dialogue between the parties. There is no simple cure for this. But if the United States is to elect Donald Trump again in 2020 after experiencing four years of the Trump presidency, the United States may be stuck in the deep political fissure for some time to come.

If Trump wins, the Republican Party will become a “Trumpified” party, which will probably result in the rejection of Reaganite internationalism. This new party will defy the notion of conservatism as defined by the giants of the conservative movement and lapse into something resembling reactionary populism. The days of Republicans representing a muscular internationalism will come to an end.

A Trump win will also radicalize the progressive wing of the Democratic Party, rejecting the notion of compromise itself. Consecutive losses in 2016 and 2020 with a candidate from the establishment wing of the party would leave them without an option but to revolt. The Bernie Sanders wing of the party has not accepted a “peace treaty” with the centrist wing of the party. Black Lives Matter is out in the streets prepared to engage in direct action. What we are witnessing within the Democratic Party is nothing more than a “cease-fire agreement” for the purpose of defeating Trump. A Trump victory will therefore likely cement reactionary populism on the one side and trigger left-wing mass action on the other, which is not a recipe for moderation.

So, the question we should be asking is not whether we want Trump or Biden. The question should be which America is preferable: an America which is a logical extension of Trumpism, or an America which is a logical extension of Biden’s centrist view of American internationalism. It is without question that Japan prefers the latter. However, simply electing Biden is not necessarily the “answer.” Biden, nor anyone for that matter, can easily revive the vital center consensus that the United States enjoyed during the early period of the Cold War. It was a specific historic creation achieved under certain conditions.

We all dreamt a daydream in the 1990s, didn’t we? A capitalized China would have to change its socio-political structure and a prosperous China would eventually create a civil society that would transform itself into a democratized China in the long run.

Looking back, they were illusions. We thought that we were engaging China for the past 30 years to induce it to change, but in fact, we were just appeasing Beijing without knowing it. U.S. policymakers, hopefully, are now aware of that.

Would Joe Biden be good for Japan? This newsletter’s distinguished editor asked me to rebut this proposition. I first thought I could do it easily, but now, in my new capacity, I must stop here lest I should mislead the readers of this publication.

With that said, personally, I am not as pessimistic about the way a Biden administration will deal with China in the twenty-first century. Biden will reach out to U.S. allies more seriously, and there will be much more certainty in his foreign policy. However, it is important to note the above concerns about how a Biden administration might fail to rise to the China challenge.

That being said, if there is room for worries or concerns about Biden, as Fareed Zakaria put it recently, it will be “a potential pitfall in Biden’s focus on personal relationships.” I would neither confirm nor deny the statement.

Then he continued, “When it comes to President Xi Jinping and highly coordinated Chinese state diplomacy, a personal focus on Xi could lead to misjudgments.” Tokyo keeps its fingers crossed and will see what happens or does not happen in November.

Kuni Miyake is president of the Foreign Policy Institute and research director at Canon Institute for Global Studies. A former career diplomat, Miyake also serves as special adviser to Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga’s Cabinet. The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect the views of the Japanese government.

Even if Biden wins, America must engage in a deep conversation about what kind of role it wishes to play in world affairs. American internationalism cannot be recovered simply by electing someone other than Trump.

However, if the United States reelects Trump as president in the coming election, it will prevent any effort to overcome the partisan divide for some time to come. A Biden presidency gives the United States the best chance to overcome these fissures and shift toward American internationalism, which will be better for Japan.

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