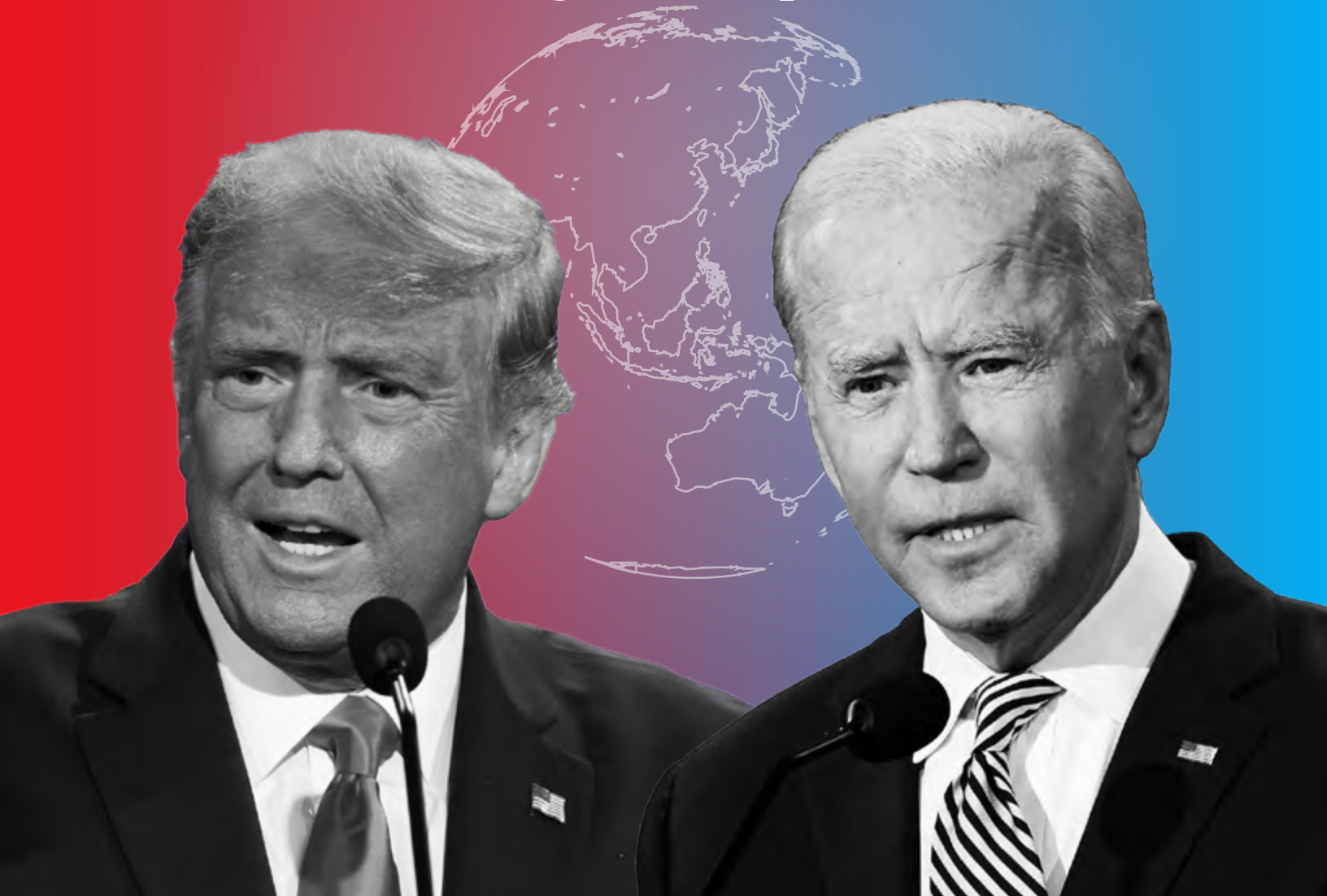




A HARDENING **US-CHINA** COMPETITION



*Asia Policy in
America's 2020 Elections
and Regional Responses*



*A Hardening US-
China Competition:
Asia Policy in America's 2020 Elections
and Regional Responses*

ROBERT SUTTER and **SATU LIMAYE**



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East-West Center in Washington

1819 L St NW, Suite 600

Washington, DC 20036 USA

Tel: 1.202.293.3995

Fax: 1.202.293.1402

Washington@EastWestCenter.org

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Foreword

In 2016, as part of the [Asia Matters for America/America Matters for Asia](#) initiative, we launched a tracker of the speeches and social media of [US presidential candidates](#) regarding United States policy toward Asia. That year's presidential election, without an incumbent seeking re-election, saw a robust debate about Asia in the primaries and general election. While Asia issues were less discussed than Islamic terrorism and Russia, there was extensive and intense debate about the proposed Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) accord, then-candidate Trump's controversial proposals for Japan and South Korea to pay more for America's defense or face US troop withdrawal—even if that meant that Tokyo and Seoul might seek to develop nuclear weapons, and his call for direct talks between the US and North Korean leaders—in contrast to his Republican primary opponents and former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in the general election. Given the heightened debate on Asia policy in the 2016 election, and building on the presidential candidates tracker, we decided to analytically assess the US election debate on Asia policy and also to include perspectives of colleagues across Asia on the American Asia policy debate. This led to the publication of *America's 2016 Election Debate on Asia Policy and Asian Reactions*.

2020 has been an entirely different election environment regarding Asia policy. This year, the focus has been around an incumbent administration's policy decisions and actions regarding hardening competition with China, and how those steps have been viewed across the US government, public, and in the Asia region. And this has occurred with particular intensity in the wake of the global novel coronavirus pandemic. Therefore, this year, we are publishing *A Hardening US-China Competition: Asia Policy in America's 2020 Elections and Regional Responses*.

Experts from across Asia express a range of responses to the costs, benefits, and durability of the hardening US-China rivalry and reflect on how to navigate intensifying US-China competition while managing myriad other issues in bilateral relations with the United States. The report assesses key issues in US regional relations and the hopes, worries, and expectations of regional allies and partners based on dozens of interviews. There is a sense in the region, perhaps as much as at home in the United States, that the US faces a critical moment.

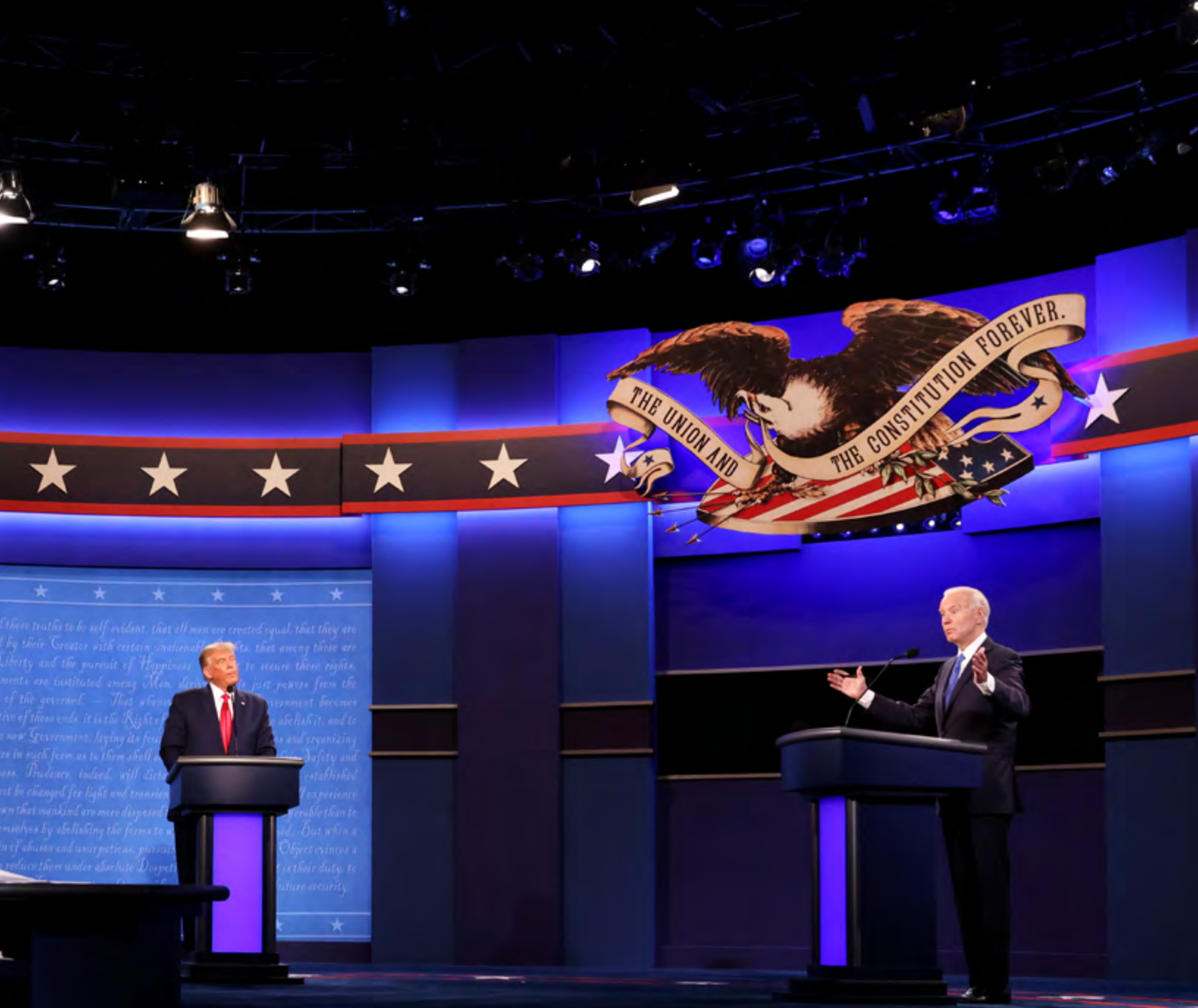
I am grateful to Professor Robert Sutter of The George Washington University for again agreeing to cooperate on this report as he did in 2016, and to the dozens of institutions and individuals in the region who participated in virtual interactions so that we could gain insights and perspectives and share them in this report. Of course, the views and assessments expressed in this report are solely those of the authors unless specifically noted.



Satu Limaye, PhD
Vice President, East-West Center &
Director, East-West Center in Washington

Executive Summary

- **A hardening US-China competition is the highest priority for most regional countries**, including Australia, India, Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, and Vietnam. **Southeast Asian countries, such as Thailand, Indonesia, and Malaysia, are less urgently concerned** due primarily to domestic political preoccupations, including pandemic recovery.
- **A hardening US-China competition creates anxiety.** Regional countries welcome balancing and bargaining upsides of growing US-China rivalry, but are wary of complications—primarily increased US demands for alignment and Beijing’s punitive pressures. South Korea expresses acute anxiety, and India and Vietnam express the least. Next to South Korea, Japan appears most conflicted. To many Southeast Asian countries, US-China tensions distract from immediate national priorities.
- **A hardening US-China competition is seen in the region as having no clear endgame or goal**, explaining increased negative views of both countries. Australia, Japan, and Taiwan will support tough US measures against China, but with concerns and caveats. Most other countries are actively hedging.
- **A hardening US-China competition is expected to be durable**, but with the caveats that a re-elected Trump administration is unpredictable and may become interested in deals, and a newly-elected Biden administration may seek areas of cooperation with Beijing on climate change and other international issues.
- **US capacity to prosecute growing competition with China is seen as substantial, but not unlimited.** US willingness to do so is questioned. Sustainable US leadership in the Indo-Pacific is a serious concern in Australia, Japan, Singapore, South Korea, and Vietnam. It is not a serious worry in India, and went unmentioned among the Southeast Asian countries more preoccupied with domestic problems. Consensus was expressed that the world could not be restored to the same kind of US leadership that prevailed in the post-1945 era, but that US standing and predictability could be repaired.
- **A hardening US-China rivalry is a major bilateral issue with the United States for Indo-Pacific countries, but not the only one.** In India, bilateral priorities—both narrow and strategic—are at least on par. For Japan, US-China relations dominate alliance management, but are only one element of its interests in a liberal international order with “layers” of options. For many Southeast Asian states, governance, human rights as well as trade and sanctions issues require more immediate attention with Washington than US-China rivalry. South Korea’s unique challenges make US-China tensions the centerpiece to its other interests and concerns.
- **Economic concerns emanating from hardening US-China rivalry, such as decoupling, are a preeminent concern.** Australia, Japan, South Korea, and Singapore, the region’s most advanced economies, are most worried about implications. India, Vietnam, and Taiwan see some benefits from US-China decoupling.



PART I:
*America's 2020
Election Debates on
Asia Policy*

Photo: Justin Sullivan/Getty Images

The US presidential election campaign debates focused by mid-2020 on the enormous and immediate domestic consequences of the worldwide novel coronavirus pandemic COVID-19 and economic crisis impacting the United States and concurrent widespread protests and counterarguments on police brutality and racial prejudice. President Donald Trump and his Democratic challenger, former Vice President Joseph Biden, were deeply divided on how the US government should respond to these domestic challenges.

Against this background, foreign policy was a secondary consideration with one notable exception—relations with China. The election campaign came in the third year of a remarkable US government turn, begun with the Trump administration's National Security Strategy in December 2017, toward harder-edged countermeasures targeting multifaceted challenges seen coming from Chinese government policies and actions. From their outset, the countermeasures were strongly supported and often initiated by bipartisan majorities in Congress. These congressional majorities generally agreed with Trump administration officials that the Chinese government posed a fundamental danger to American well-being and international interests; China undermined American influence in a headlong quest to attain Asian dominance and global leadership employing coercive security measures, predatory and mercantilist economic practices, and nefarious influence operations.²

Nevertheless, this accord “inside the beltway” (i.e. confined to Washington, DC) between Congress, the administration, supportive foreign policy experts, and think tank specialists remained poorly understood and tended to be viewed warily by many state and

local leaders as well as in general US public opinion. Until very recently, these local leaders and constituents remained interested in continued cooperation and sought to avoid serious tensions with China. They often opposed President Trump's signature punitive tariffs on Chinese imports as costly and counterproductive.³ They worried, too, about impacts on higher education budgets if there were significant shortfalls of full tuition-paying students from China—helping to make education the 6th largest service export.⁴

Such ambivalence among Democratic candidates about countering Chinese challenges showed in the infrequent rhetoric about China throughout much of the campaign. However, Beijing's duplicitous mishandling of COVID-19 leading to a global plague prompted the most dramatic negative shift in US public opinion against the Chinese government since the dark days of the Cold War.⁵ Shaping and appealing to public sentiment, the Trump campaign emphasized the president's record of standing against Chinese malfeasance in contrast with perceived failures of previous US leaders, including Vice President Biden. Vice President Biden rebutted, charging that President Trump sought favors from Chinese leaders that undercut effective policy and had praised Chinese President Xi Jinping; Vice President Biden promised a resolutely "tough" China policy.⁶

Preoccupation with China and domestic issues meant that aspects of US-Asia policy other than China received little attention in the US presidential election campaign. President Trump's record in the region raised a variety of questions and uncertainties among regional government officials, commentators, and specialists. The burgeoning US-China rivalry profoundly impacted Asian governments' interests in regional security, economic, and diplomatic dynamics. Regional officials and nongovernment experts had reservations and criticisms as well as supporting comments for existing US policies. On the whole, they remained uncertain what changes would take place in US policy toward China and other important issues relevant to Asia as a result of the 2020 US election.⁷

Most notably, while Trump administration strategy documents were clear in the high priority given to Asian and other allies and partners, and majorities in Congress strongly back regional allies and partners, the president's rhetoric and behavior were viewed as

disruptive and contrary to stated administration and congressional goals. Most Democratic candidates with Vice President Biden in the lead promised a more rigorous and consistent approach to allies and partners. However, it remained unclear how this would be accomplished and what priority this approach would have in the Democratic policy agenda heavily focused on US domestic issues.

2016 Election Debates on Asia and Hardening US Policy on China

Debates over US policy toward China occurred frequently in past US presidential election campaigns. The breakthrough achieved in the Richard Nixon-Mao Zedong rapprochement in 1972 allowed the two powers, despite their many profound differences, to cooperate together against the then advancing Soviet Union, but there was continued US debate over issues particularly involving Taiwan, human rights, and trade. The end of the Cold War, the Chinese military crackdown on peaceful demonstrators in Beijing's Tiananmen Square and other cities in June 1989, and the demise of the USSR shattered the previous US-China accord focused on the Soviet threat. A stasis of pragmatically managing differences amid mutually beneficial commercial engagement prevailed in the first decade of this millennium, but it gradually ended as China became ever more assertive in challenging the Obama administration (2009–2017), eliciting limited responses that did not dissuade further Chinese advances at US expense.⁸

2016 Election Debates

Without an incumbent president seeking re-election, the lively debates among aspirants in both parties in the 2016 campaign registered differing degrees of concern over China. Republican leaders in Congress and the Republican Party platform in the 2016 election were harsh in condemning various Chinese practices. Though many China-related issues were prominent in the presidential campaign that year, overall, they lagged behind other foreign policy concerns like Islamic extremism and Russia. Among issues in Asia, broad concern with China was overshadowed by strong debate on two sets of issues: international trade and the proposed Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) accord, and then-candidate Trump's controversial proposals for Japan and South Korea to pay more for America's defense; and if they did not, he advocated

US withdrawal. Trump indicated that Tokyo and Seoul then might seek to develop nuclear weapons, which he viewed as an unfortunate but unavoidable consequence. On North Korea, he called for direct talks between the United States and North Korean leaders, a sharp contrast with longstanding US administration and congressional policy.⁹

Though most presidential candidates in 2016 voiced harsh criticism of Chinese policies and behavior, the mix of strong differences and positive engagement seen in the Obama administration's policy toward China was reflected in the candidates' similarly mixed policy recommendations. The contenders' views also were in line with American public opinion that, on balance, disapproved of the Chinese government and some of its policies but ranked China lower than in the recent past as an economic threat and viewed China's military as less threatening to US interests than terrorism or nuclear weapons development in North Korea and Iran.¹⁰

Officials and specialists in Beijing saw negatives with both the Democratic nominee Secretary Hillary Clinton and Republican nominee Donald Trump. They judged that relations would worsen at least to some degree if Secretary Clinton were elected. Overall, a common view was that China could "shape" President Trump to behave in line with its interests, as Trump was seen as less ideological and more pragmatic than Secretary Clinton.¹¹

Hardening Policy Targeting China

US government hardening against Chinese challenges to American interests emerged erratically in the first year of the Trump administration. The new tough line against China was first articulated clearly in the National Security Strategy in December 2017, almost one year after the start of the administration. That release was overshadowed by the afterglow of President Trump's lavish treatment by Chinese President Xi during the US president's visit in November. In a departure from his normal practice in reaction to foreign hosts, President Trump was effusive in his public remarks of appreciation throughout the Chinese visit.¹²

Momentum against China's challenges developed after that, reaching and maintaining a high level during the heat of the 2020 presidential election campaign, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic surged in the United States in March 2020. The groundwork for the

American government effort against China developed through close collaboration between the administration and both Democrats and Republicans in Congress. Extraordinary administration and bipartisan congressional cooperation broke the mold of past practice where the US Congress usually served as a brake and obstacle impeding US administration initiatives in dealing with China. The close alignment of the administration and bipartisan congressional majorities provided the key driver of the new tougher US policy approach to China.¹³

Nonetheless, this alignment of government policymakers "inside the beltway" faced major uncertainties. Most immediate was the absence of a push toward a tougher China policy on the part of the American public and many state and local officials who remained largely ambivalent on China. They often appeared intent on maximizing commercial benefits of engagement whether from foreign students or exports or even inward foreign direct investment. They disapproved of many Chinese government actions, but they also sought to avoid confrontation and to develop constructive ties. Mainstream US media initially gave less attention to the broad policy change taking place in Washington than they gave to President Trump's swings from approving Chinese leaders to condemning Chinese trade practices, often concluding that the president's actions were tactical maneuvers seeking "protectionist" trade deals with China that would appeal to his political supporters. Indeed, President Trump's unpredictable discourse on China supported this media judgment and clearly complicated the broader administration-congressional collaboration on an effective strategy toward China. Finally, when significant costs of the tougher approach toward China materialized with the administration's punitive tariffs starting the so-called trade war beginning in 2018, they were widely criticized by Democratic presidential candidates seeking to appeal to farmers and others subject to Chinese retaliation to the US punitive tariffs. Such behavior suggested that these American leaders not only saw the tariffs as misguided but they also were seen as demonstrating unwillingness to pay significant costs in countering Chinese challenges.¹⁴



US President Donald Trump shakes hands with China's Vice Premier Liu He after announcing a "Phase One" trade agreement with China in the Oval Office at the White House on October 11, 2019 in Washington, DC. Photo: Win McNamee/Getty Images

2019–2020 Campaign Debates on China and Other Asian Issues

The Democratic Party's presidential campaign debates began in June 2019 with marathon sessions involving groups of candidates taking place over two days. After that, 23 candidates would eventually participate in at least one of the 11 debates held between June 2019 and March 2020. Foreign policy issues were not mentioned much in 2019; they received some more attention in the 2020 debates. Discussion of Asian issues among the candidates was dominated by China and North Korea. With an incumbent president running for re-election based on his record in the first term, the campaign debates on China and Asia more broadly focused on issues raised by Democratic Party aspirants. Only a few Republicans registered public disagreement with the Trump administration's policies.¹⁵

China Debates

The Trump administration record centered on the creation and implementation of congressionally mandated "whole-of-government"

efforts to counter malign Chinese challenges set forth as a matter of law in the National Defense Authorization Act of 2019 (passed in August 2018) and other legislation. Most visible were an escalating series of punitive tariffs along with related investment restrictions and export controls carried out by President Trump against Chinese economic practices. The trade war reached a truce in a December 2018 US-China summit and trade talks began in January 2019. They progressed in fits and starts, leading ultimately to a "Phase One" trade deal in January 2020. The administration followed through on efforts to root out Chinese theft of US intellectual property, espionage, and influence operations in the United States and to counter Chinese military advances and economic expansion abroad. Congress sustained a steady stream of legislation critical of Chinese practices.¹⁶

Faced with continued toughening of US policy, China remained on the defensive, seeking to protect its interests but avoiding initiatives that might worsen the situation. Though President Xi's carefully fostered image as an international strongman intent on pursuing China's Dream of regional and global leadership continued, the Chinese head of state took personal responsibility to carefully manage US demands. He seemed prepared to wait out the current negative period, anticipating American pullback from its strong positions against China.¹⁷

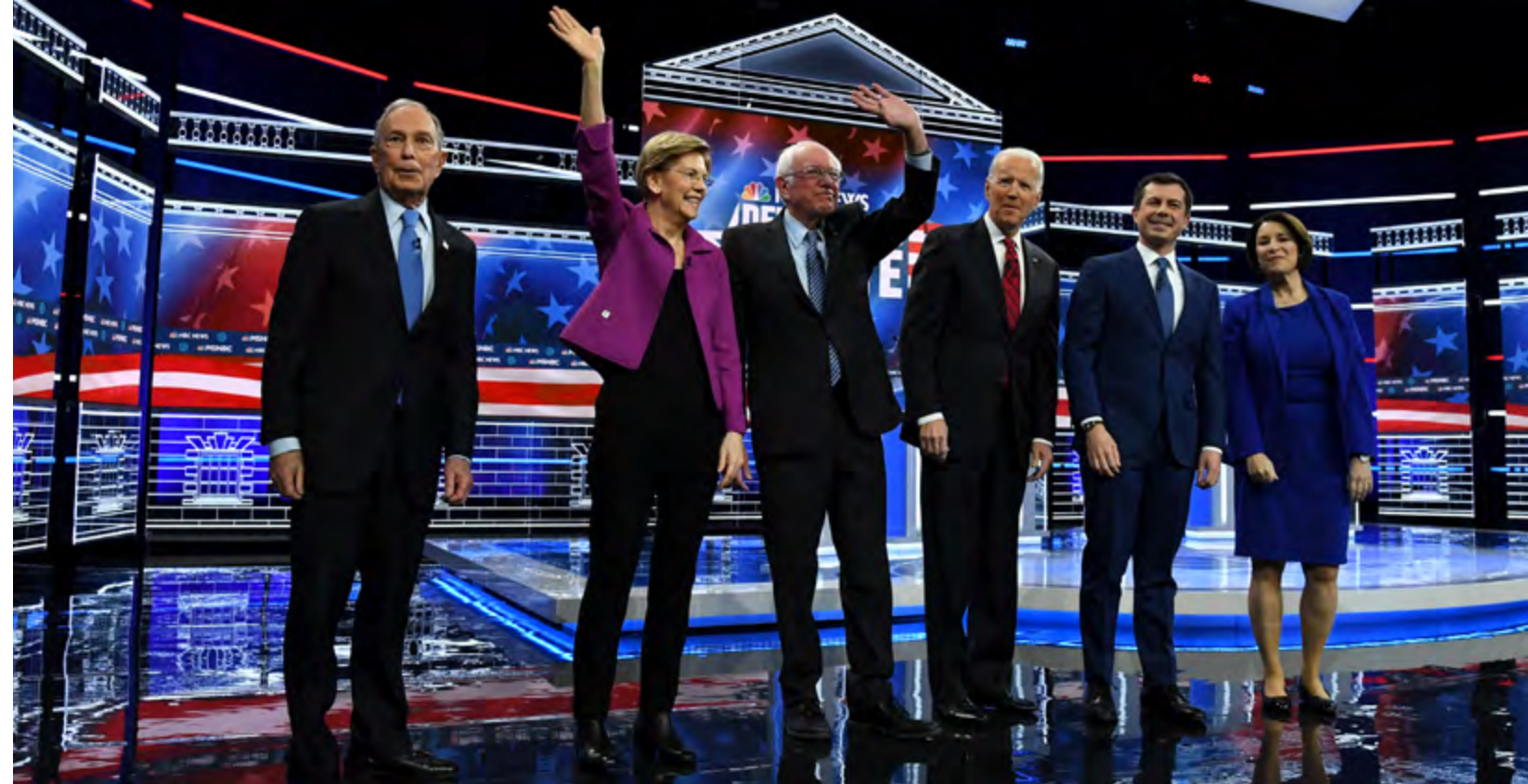
Indeed, it was not at all certain that the change in China policy called for in 2018 would amount to more than another episode in the zigs and zags of US engagement with China since the end of the Cold War. Though Congress remained negative about China in 2019, the most important foreign policy legislation of the year, the National Defense Authorization Act of 2020, had scattered provisions dealing with China, without the priority and substance given to China in the previous year. Various China issues were addressed in many other proposed bills, but the vast majority of such legislation garnered little congressional support.

On the campaign trail, Democratic candidates and the American media registered little urgency over the China danger. Beijing's human rights abuses in Xinjiang and control in Hong Kong were duly criticized, usually without calling for strong US countermeasures to punish China. President Trump's tariffs were criticized for causing economic loss for American farmers in Iowa and other early primary states. China received low priority treatment in the Democratic candidates' debates.

Media interviews with the candidates saw issues with China addressed toward the end of the discussion, not in the beginning, if they came up at all.¹⁸

Senator Bernie Sanders and Senator Elizabeth Warren were critical of the US trade relationship with China, but they placed the blame on American negotiators reflecting corporate interests rather than on the Chinese government. Senator Sanders called for a more peaceful, just, and environmentally sustainable world and tended to eschew the use of power politics. When asked directly, Senator Sanders said China was not an existential threat to America. He urged stronger US efforts to establish a positive cooperative relationship with Beijing on climate change and other issues. Against this backdrop, it was a notable exception when Senator Sanders was asked in a televised interview in February 2020 what he as president would do if China attempted to invade Taiwan; he replied that he would intervene with US forces. Like Senator Sanders, Senator Warren also wanted to reduce the defense budget and US military involvement in Afghanistan, but she backed use of power politics, seeking to bolster the US position in competition with China through greater security cooperation with Asia-Pacific allies and NATO.¹⁹

Vice President Biden backed away from his remarks earlier in the campaign about the insignificance of the challenges posed by China, but he repeatedly emphasized Chinese weaknesses in comparison to US strengths, asserting that China was in a much worse position than, and no match for, America. Newcomer candidate and former Mayor of New York City Michael Bloomberg kept a low profile on China; his deep business relations and strong advocacy for American economic engagement with China were not highlighted. Former Mayor of South Bend, Indiana Pete Buttigieg saw a real danger in China as a power dominating high technology spreading its influence in the world through its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and other efforts, yet his remedy was not to confront China through punitive tariffs and restrictions. He saw the main answer as strengthening American competitive assets at home, and averred that cooperation with China was needed on climate change and other issues. Meanwhile, Senator Amy Klobuchar saw utility in well-managed US-allied pressures to get China to stop its trade and economic practices harming the United States. However, among the 100 steps she proposed to take in the first 100 days of her presidency, only one—against Chinese



(Left to right) Former NYC Mayor Mike Bloomberg, Senator Elizabeth Warren, Senator Bernie Sanders, former Vice President Joe Biden, former South Bend, Indiana Mayor Pete Buttigieg, and Senator Amy Klobuchar on stage for the Democratic presidential primary debate on February 19, 2020 in Las Vegas, Nevada. Photo: Ethan Miller/Getty Images

steel dumping—was about China, and it came far down the list.²⁰ Public opinion registered in concurrent polling data suggested that the episodic disapproval of Chinese government practices by the Democratic Party candidates was an appropriate approach. Jake Sullivan, a veteran policy advisor to Secretary Clinton, President Barack Obama, and Vice President Biden, judged in June 2019 that the “inside the beltway” discourse about the acute danger posed by China was not shared by the American public. He said public opinion polls showed that “the bottom line is there’s a broad view that China shouldn’t be our enemy, that we can work with this country, that we can trade with this country, and that we can seek investment from this country.” Looking ahead, he advised that “five years from now we could be talking about a broader American electorate that does view China as a rival or a foe or an enemy.”²¹

Polling from the Chicago Council of Global Affairs in September 2019 underlined trends showing public ambivalence toward China. A Brookings Institution study in November 2019 judged that the absence of clear public support for the ongoing whole-of-government approach against China made substantial attention to the China debate unlikely in the 2020 campaign. The Center for a New American Security viewed

The “inside the beltway” discourse about the acute danger posed by China was not shared by the American public

the gap between the harsh view of China held by the Trump administration and congressional leaders and the much more ambivalent public as complicating the formation of an American consensus to deal with the challenges posed by China.²²

The episodic prominence of China issues in the 2020 campaign was an exception to the pattern of low priority accorded to foreign policy issues by the Democratic candidates. Commentators and media coverage of the many debates of the Democratic candidates in 2019–2020 remarked on how infrequently foreign policy issues came up in the discussions. *The New York Times* special feature on all the Democratic candidates issued on January 19, 2020, had almost no coverage of foreign affairs, much less issues of the Indo-Pacific.²³ Review of the candidates' websites showed a similar low priority to foreign issues. Vice President Biden's website in June 2020 surprisingly did not feature foreign policy questions, an area of expertise for this candidate developed over decades of government experience, including as chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Thus, of the 34 issues given attention in his proposed plans for US policy after the election, one dealt with a broad need to restore American leadership based on democratic values, and another dealt specifically with Central America. All the others were focused on domestic US issues.²⁴

The candidates' limited attention to China issues was notable against the background of much less attention to

other issues in the broad Indo-Pacific region. The East-West Center in Washington's *Asia Matters for America* initiative database *2020 Presidential Candidates on the Indo-Pacific* used for this study covered all the debates as well as the candidates' readily available interviews, speeches, tweets, media statements, and other public remarks. Searching the database in June 2020 found that the five leading candidates at the end of the campaign—Biden, Buttigieg, Klobuchar, Sanders, and Warren—made significant reference to China issues 93 times during the campaign. The next most prominent Indo-Pacific issues discussed were North Korea, which came up 18 times; Indo-Pacific allies and partners, noted seven times; various Southeast Asian issues, noted six times; and trade issues related to the aborted TPP and the resulting Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTTP), which were mentioned five times. Japan and India were mentioned specifically three times each, South Korea two times, South China Sea and Taiwan once each, and Australia none.²⁵

Based on review of the *Asia Matters for America* initiative database, most of the candidates criticized the failure of President Trump's summitry to improve the fraught situation created by North Korea's ever-growing nuclear weapons development. Senator Sanders was more open than the others to dialogue with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, and more reluctant to use demonstrations of US military power, coordinated efforts with allies, and economic sanctions to pressure North Korea for concessions.

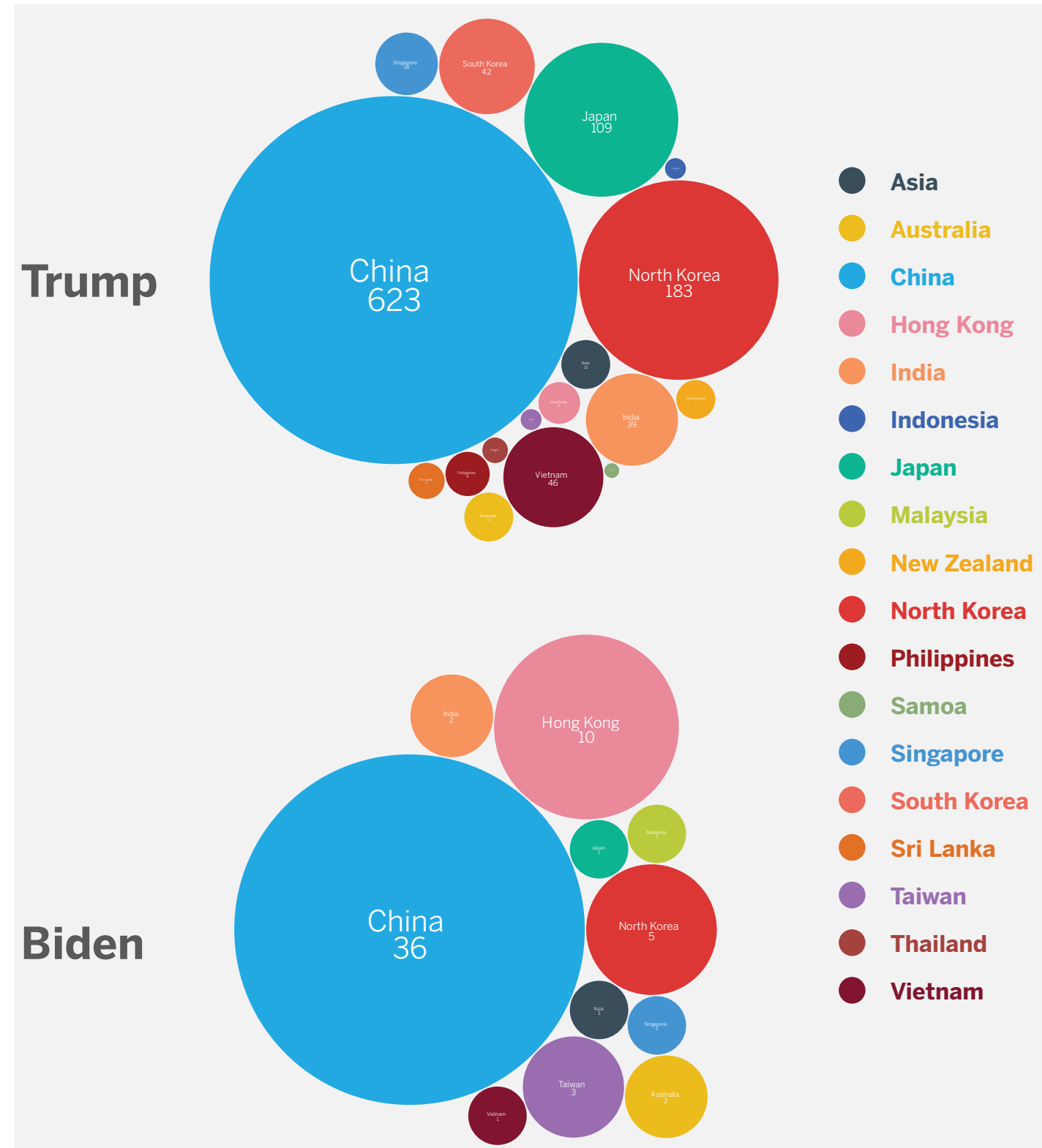
Vice President Biden, Mayor Buttigieg, Senator Sanders, and Senator Warren each highlighted a perceived broad growth of international authoritarianism adverse to US values and interest. Vice President Biden referred to using US military strength to counter such opponents, while Senator Sanders, Senator Warren, and Senator Klobuchar favored cutbacks in military spending. Mayor Buttigieg judged a smarter defense posture focused on requirements for the future would lead to significant cost savings. There was broad agreement among the candidates on halting US military involvement in the “endless war” in Afghanistan, though Senator Klobuchar and Mayor Buttigieg, the latter based on military service there, argued for some residual presence, especially involving training and intelligence.

Trump vs. Biden: Tweets on the Indo-Pacific region

How often do US President Donald Trump and former US Vice President Joe Biden tweet about the Indo-Pacific?

This visualization compares the number of Twitter references to Indo-Pacific countries by Trump and Biden since November 4, 2016, the day after Trump's election, through August 31, 2020. Indo-Pacific countries are defined as those comprising the US Indo-Pacific Command area of responsibility. Circle sizes are normalized to account for Trump's much larger number of Tweets (20,467) than Biden's (4,264).

Sources: trumptwitterarchive.com/archive, kaggle.com/rohanrao/joe-biden-tweets



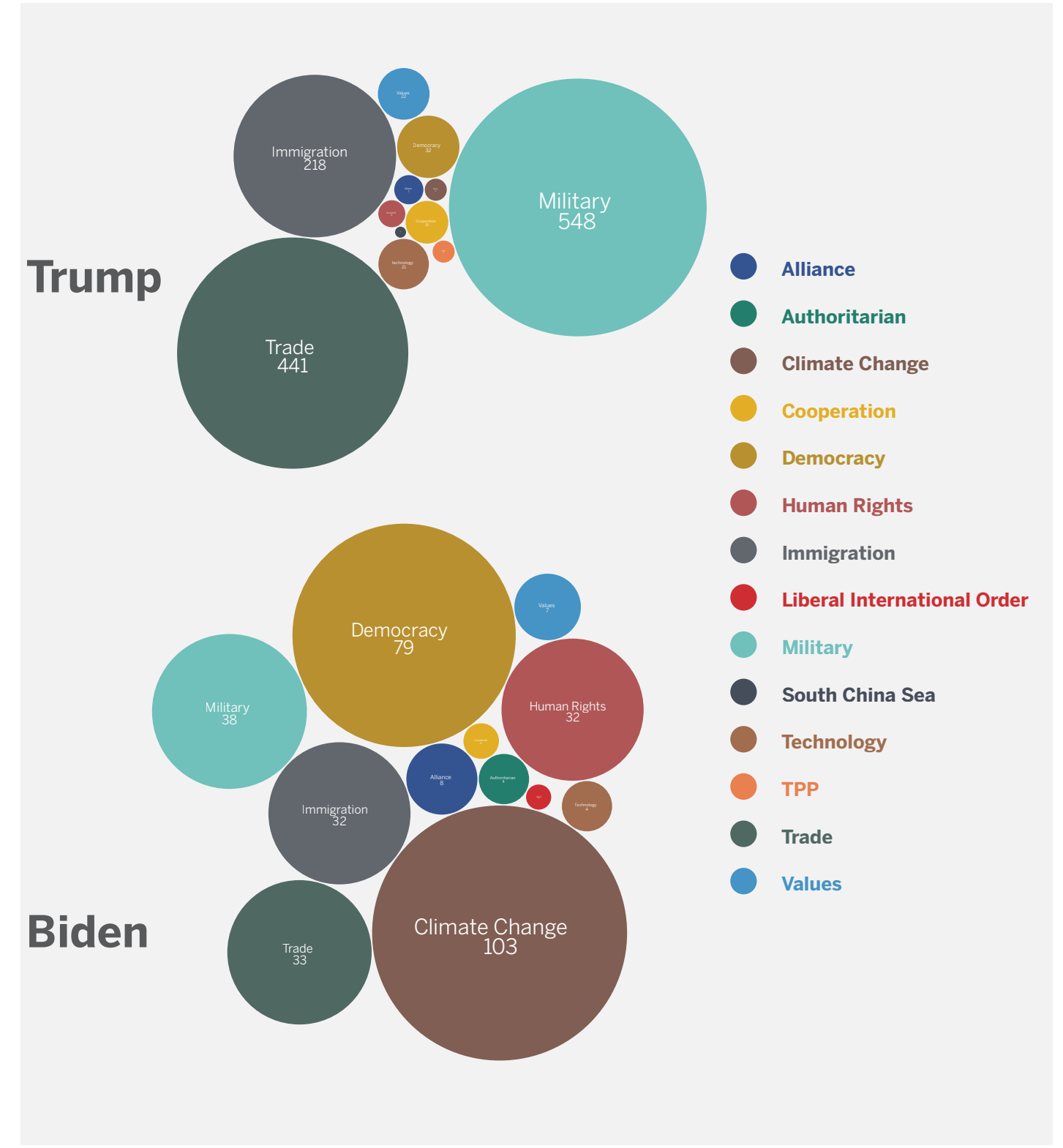
Among Indo-Pacific countries, Trump and Biden both tweeted by far the most about China. Trade and military competition was in the foreground of both candidates' tweets, but Trump was relatively silent on human rights issues in relation to China, while Biden was outspoken on Hong Kong (his second highest number of tweets). Both men devoted many tweets to North Korea, with Trump touting diplomatic progress and Biden dismissive of the President's summit diplomacy. Given Trump's frequent use of Twitter and willingness to conduct diplomacy by tweet, it shouldn't be surprising that he tweeted about 16 Indo-Pacific countries in total compared to Biden's 11.

Trump vs. Biden: Tweets on Issues

Military and trade first, or climate change and democracy?

This visualization measures the number of Twitter references to 15 key terms by US President Donald Trump and former US Vice President Joe Biden since November 4, 2016, the day after Trump's election, through August 31, 2020. The terms are: Alliance, Authoritarian, Climate Change, Cooperation, Democracy, Human Rights, Immigration, Liberal International Order, Military, Multilateralism*, South China Sea, Technology, TPP, Trade, and Values.

Sources: trumptwitterarchive.com/archive, kaggle.com/rohanrao/joe-biden-tweets



*Neither Trump nor Biden tweeted about Multilateralism.

A significant regional issue arose in 2020 when Trump administration leaders pressed South Korea to dramatically increase its host nation support for US troops stationed in the country or face US withdrawal. US officials signaled that Japan would face a similar choice when scheduled US-Japan talks on burden-sharing began later in 2020. The issue reportedly raised concerns on the part of congressional Democrats and Republicans with an interest in the region, but the issue was not prominently raised by the Democratic presidential candidates.

Another issue seen as weakening American standing in Southeast Asia as well as with ASEAN and the regional multilateral groups it convenes came from President Trump's poor attendance record at the annual ASEAN-convened East Asian Summit and the scrapping of what was seen as a poorly planned ASEAN-US summit in the United States in 2020. This issue also was not addressed by the Democratic candidates.

On trade, Senator Sanders and Senator Warren strongly opposed the TPP while Vice President Biden, Senator Klobuchar, and Mayor Buttigieg showed various degrees of support for the approach of using a modified agreement to support US values and interests. The modified US NAFTA agreement with Mexico and Canada was seen as an indicator of how the candidates would respond to a modified TPP, with Senator Warren now supporting the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement and only Senator Sanders remaining strongly opposed.²⁶

2020: The Pandemic and Public Opinion Upend Campaign Strategies, Target China

By January 2020, the reported campaign plans of President Trump and Vice President Biden, the prospective Democratic nominee, seemed generally clear. The president emphasized the remarkable growth of the American economy during his administration, involving substantial benefits for workers, including minorities experiencing record-low unemployment and increasing wages. The Phase One trade deal with China signed in January fit in with the campaign's narrative of the president advancing US economic interests at home and abroad. Vice President Biden was expected to run as a restorationist, offering a return to the steady and moderate foreign policy approach of the Obama years. China was viewed as a special


challenge, requiring a tougher American approach. Criticizing President Trump's tariffs as alienating close US allies and partners, Vice President Biden called for building a united front of US allies and partners to confront China's abusive behaviors and human rights violations, even as he sought to cooperate with Beijing on issues such as climate change, nonproliferation, and global health security.²⁷

Seeing President Trump as more unpredictable and disruptive than they had anticipated, senior Chinese officials nonetheless were said to favor the president's re-election over a Democratic challenger. President Trump's transactional approach to politics, seen in former US Ambassador John Bolton's contested disclosure of the US president appealing for Chinese purchases of US products in support of his re-election, was arguably preferable to a more principle-driven president. Chinese strategic planners welcomed President Trump's continued pressures upsetting allies and partners that weakened American ability in Asia and elsewhere to counter challenges posed by China.²⁸

The above plans of both campaigns ended with the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic hitting the United States with devastating consequences beginning in March, resulting in more than 200,000 deaths by October, and the deepest dive in economic growth and employment since the Great Depression ninety years earlier. The Trump campaign plan was overtaken by events. The self-isolation required to reduce the virus' lethal impact curbed the president mobilizing electoral support through mass rallies held in key battleground states. For a time, President Trump and his political advisors employed the president's personal involvement in frequent White House media briefings on the "war" against the virus as a means to keep his leadership before the public. However, critics argued that the president's performance was viewed by some as erratic, and coincided with widespread complaints by state and local officials of the ineffective US government responses to the crisis. One result was a decline in approval ratings of the president's leadership.²⁹

The need for a campaign message that would help re-elect the president coincided with an increase in leadership invective on US-China relations. With the Phase One trade deal duly celebrated in the administration, the whole-of-government counters to Chinese challenges resumed with greater prominence. As COVID-19 hit the United States with a vengeance

 **Lijian Zhao 赵立坚** @zlj517 · Mar 12
 China government account
 2/2 CDC was caught on the spot. When did patient zero begin in US? How many people are infected? What are the names of the hospitals? It might be US army who brought the epidemic to Wuhan. Be transparent! Make public your data! US owe us an explanation!

 **Donald J. Trump** @realDonaldTrump · Mar 16
 The United States will be powerfully supporting those industries, like Airlines and others, that are particularly affected by the Chinese Virus. We will be stronger than ever before!

(Left and below) When Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Lijian Zhao and other Chinese diplomats abroad tweeted a conspiracy theory in March suggesting that the virus was planted in Wuhan by US military delegates, it provoked a strong reaction in the US—resulting in President Trump and other members of his administration regularly referring to COVID-19 as the “Chinese virus” or “Wuhan virus,” despite the controversy.

Source: Twitter, Asia Matters for America

ASIA MATTERS FOR AMERICA
 TEXT
Secretary Michael R. Pompeo Remarks to the Press - China
 ... There will come a day when we will go evaluate how the entire world responded. We know this much: We know that the first government to be aware of the Wuhan virus was the Chinese Government. That imposes a special responsibility to raise the flag, to say, “We have a problem, this is different and unique and presents risk.”
 Trump Administration Tracker: March 17, 2020

beginning in March, Beijing sought the global leadership spotlight as a benefactor supplying needed protective personal equipment abroad and providing a model of efficient methods in checking the spread of the virus in China. The Chinese narrative ignored China as the source of the virus that led to devastating consequences for other countries, including the United States. A tipping point came when Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Lijian Zhao and other Chinese diplomats abroad suggested in March that the virus was clandestinely planted in Wuhan by visiting US military delegates. The very strong US reaction saw President Trump emphatically call the virus the “Chinese” virus for several days, even though American opinion leaders judged the term racist. The president temporarily stopped this practice but Secretary Michael Pompeo pressed international bodies to examine the source of what he called the “Wuhan” virus.³⁰

The acrimonious charges and countercharges influenced American opinion of the Chinese government. A wide variety of polls showed unprecedented levels of disapproval of the Chinese government, even more than following the brutal Chinese military crackdown against peaceful demonstrators in Beijing’s Tiananmen Square and other Chinese cities in 1989. Chinese President Xi was viewed with no confidence by over 70 percent of Americans. China was seen as a threat by nine in 10 Americans. Republicans were more supportive than Democrats in calling for tougher US measures in response to Chinese responsibility for the COVID-19 crisis, but all registered broad antipathy for the Chinese government and its leadership.³¹

By April 2020, the Trump administration and associated political action committees set an agenda for the campaign that featured President Trump standing up firmly to Chinese challenges and depicting Vice President Biden as a holdover from the failed China policies of the past. President Trump seemed to relish this depiction as the savior of America against the “Chinese menace” when he highlighted in tweets in 2019 that he “was the chosen one” to “take on” China. Underlining this point, the president in May 2020 retweeted a picture of all the living former presidents posing with Barack Obama in the White House in January 2009 with the caption “You can thank these men for allowing Communist China to grow to the dominant dictatorship superpower that it is!”³²

ASIA MATTERS FOR AMERICA
 TEXT
Remarks by President Trump Before Marine One Departure - China
 ... \$500 billion. Ripped it out of the United States. And not only that — if you take a look, intellectual property theft. Add that to it. And add a lot of other things to it. So somebody had to do it. I am the chosen one. Somebody had to do it. So I’m taking on China. I’m taking on China on trade.
 Trump Administration Tracker: August 21, 2019

Donald J. Trump Retweeted
 **Michael Nöthem** @mikandynoth... · May 10
 Trump; first President in history with the courage to stand up to China, especially after Obama’s disastrous foreign policy. He was too busy spying on @realDonaldTrump. Was Obama the most corrupt President in history?
 #ObamaGate #SpyGate #KAG #MAGA #FoxNews #ItWasGoodUntilItWasnt

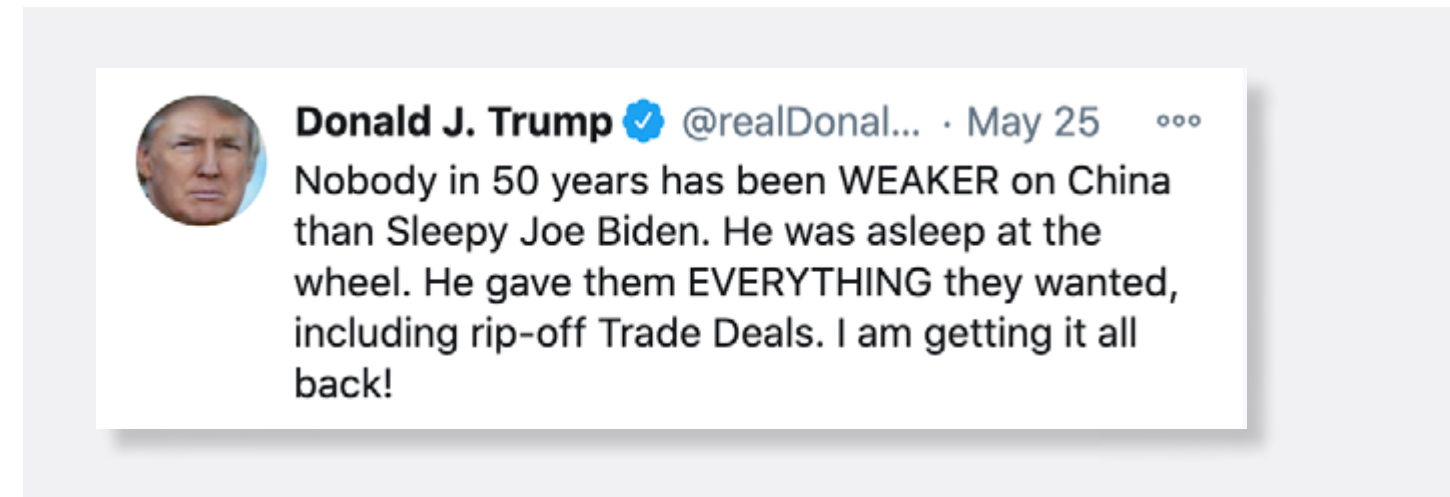
 You can thank these men for allowing Communist China to grow to the dominant dictatorship superpower that it is!

President Trump now avoided direct communication with President Xi. In May, he threatened to “cut off the whole relationship” and advised in regard to negotiations with President Xi that “right now I don’t want to speak to him.” He was ambivalent about the Phase One trade deal with China, advising that “I feel differently about that than I did three months ago.”³³

Concurrently, the administration went forward with what one senior US official privately characterized as “an explosion” of measures over the next months targeting the Chinese Communist Party-state as a predatory and powerful systemic opponent of US interests and influence whose advance fundamentally endangered the American “way of life” and those of US allies and partners. Senior official speeches laid out frameworks involving a Cold War-style ideological struggle with China; the administration imposed serious political and economic sanctions and economic restrictions over political and economic disputes; military shows of force were more prominent in support of allies and partners disputing Chinese territorial claims in the South China Sea; and stepped up engagement and support for allies and partners came with the sensitive partnership with Taiwan receiving extraordinary attention—all with a focus to push back and more effectively deter Chinese advances at others’ expense and to impose serious costs when China is not deterred.³⁴

The unprecedented American steps against Beijing fit in well with the Trump re-election campaign depicting the president as a strong protector of US interests against China’s challenges and portraying Vice President Biden as responsible for what was seen as failed US policies of the past. Media reports also said they were in line with plans by Trump officials to make it very difficult for a Biden administration to reverse the recent course of US policy toward China in the event that President Trump is not re-elected.³⁵

To counter, Vice President Biden went on the offensive. As Beijing moved to impose a national security law on Hong Kong despite US and other international opposition, Vice President Biden said on May 23 that Trump has given China “a pass on human rights”; he added, “it’s no surprise China’s government believes it can act with impunity to violate its commitments. The administration’s protests are too little, too late—and Donald Trump has conspicuously had



little to say.” In response, President Trump signaled he was willing to scrap his trade progress with China in order to punish China over the coronavirus and Hong Kong, adding in a tweet on May 26 that “Nobody in 50 years has been WEAKER on China than Sleepy Joe Biden. He was asleep at the wheel. He gave them EVERYTHING they wanted, including rip-off trade deals. I am getting it all back!”³⁶

Beijing remained defiant in the face of US pressure. It reportedly no longer showed preference for President Trump, though it remained cautious in response to various US affronts, seeking to avoid further deterioration. The Congress did its part in stoking anti-China measures notably in the 388 pieces of legislation on China pending and the draft National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021 expected to pass in the weeks before the elections or in a lame-duck session after the election. US and international commentators commonly depicted US-China relations taking on the attributes of a Cold War, with enhanced danger of a hot war conflict over Taiwan or the South China Sea where the US and Chinese military forces faced and challenged each other frequently, sometimes more than once a day.³⁷

American public opinion showed some volatility as election day approached. Polling results by the Chicago Council of Global Affairs published in September and based on surveys in July showed wide differences among Democrats and Republicans in their attitudes toward China. Consistent with Trump administration policy, Republicans were much more focused on China as a threat to America, favoring strong US countermeasures. Democrats gave much greater attention to global threats posed by the ongoing pandemic and climate change. Despite

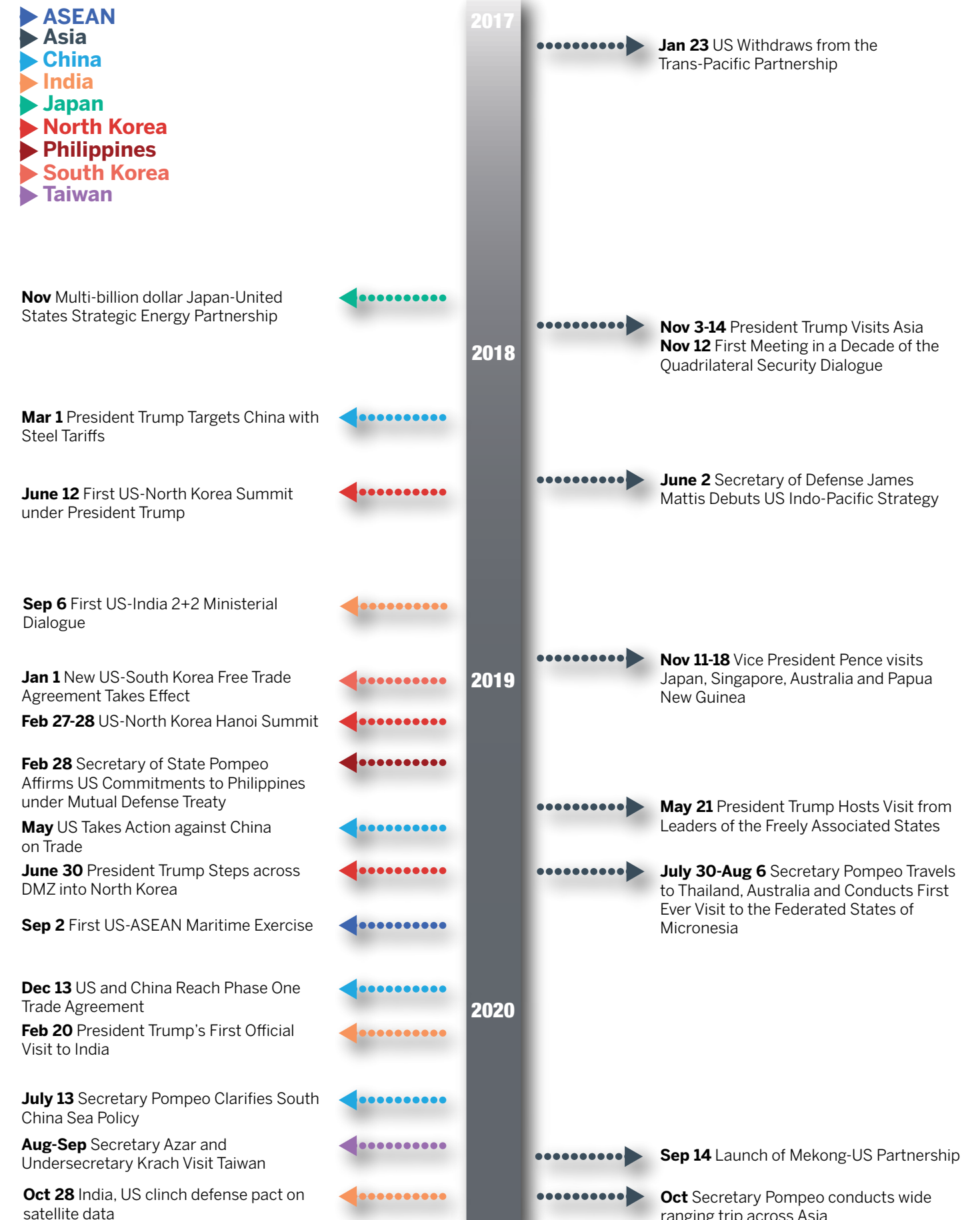
Select Developments in US-Asia Policy: 2017-Present

the shared negative views among both Democrats and Republicans that Beijing is a rival to Washington, most Democrats favored a strategy of engagement over containment. Six in 10 Democrats said that the United States should pursue friendly engagement with China.³⁸

China's Preferences

Issues in China's relations with the United States are central for Chinese leaders. President Xi Jinping and his colleagues' deliberations and calculations about the United States remain secret, protected by Beijing's strict enforcement against unauthorized disclosure.

As seen in discussions above, the Chinese official position avoided taking sides in discussions of choices in US elections. Nevertheless, foreign journalistic and other reports indicated private preference for President Trump over a Democratic Party candidate from the 2016 election up to 2020. The upsurge of anti-China actions by the Trump administration since March 2020 with a further upsurge beginning in July came with reported indications that Beijing no longer favored President Trump and remained ambivalent about the US candidates. During 2020, as in the past, the official Chinese stance is that Beijing does not take a position in US elections and other such internal affairs. Beijing in practice has been careful to eschew confrontation with the Trump administration. It appears to seek to avoid serious worsening of relations, though it remains firm in retaliating against US actions and often punishes US allies and partners that cooperate with US actions against China.





PART II:
*Indo-Pacific
Responses to
US-China
Hardening Rivalry*

Photo: Kevin Frayer/Getty Images

Australia



Australia's close alliance relationship with the United States and strong dependency on trade with China head the list of reasons why the trajectory of the US-China competition receives top priority attention from Australian decisionmakers and broader public constituencies. Australians follow closely the US election campaign for signs of possible changes in US-China policy impacting Australia.

The specialists fully recognize that Australia is unique among regional powers in bringing its policy toward China into close alignment with the United States and its strong criticism of Chinese behavior during the Trump administration. Nevertheless, they stress that Australia intends to follow its own path that attempts to sustain close economic relations with China despite major and growing Australian differences with China over Chinese regional expansionism and nefarious penetration of and influence operations in Australian politics and the broader society. Australia also has reservations about President Trump's negative treatment of alliances, notably South Korea and Japan, and strident Trump administration ideological rhetoric against China, which is seen as excessive. The Australian specialists also view the Trump administration as giving inadequate attention to other Indo-Pacific states and regional issues as it focuses on China. In particular, Australia favors greater inclusiveness in regional multilateral frameworks that enable middle powers like Australia and smaller partners to influence efforts to support a rules-based order beneficial to them as well as the United States.

Australian specialists judge that a tough US policy toward China will continue into 2021. This is seen as in line with Australian trends where public and elite opinion have turned dramatically against China in the past few years, though pragmatism over trade and other economic relations prompts continued debate. The specialists are uncertain about how a Biden administration, preoccupied with the pandemic, economic distress, and political polarization, would actually perform differently than the Trump administration on China. In Asia, they

Australia

judge that a Biden administration would likely nurture closer US-allied relations, promote more US involvement in Asian multilateralism supporting a rules-based order, and give greater attention to the views and interests of regional allies and partners. Australian specialists also expect more focus on region-wide human rights and democracy conditions under a possible Biden administration.

The most important potential cost to Australia in the strong US-China rivalry is the Chinese government halting Australian exports to China or curbing tourists and students going to Australia. Though the pandemic for now restricts tourist and student travel, and some secondary Australian exports have been hit by Chinese restrictions, the specialists see Australian exports remaining robust while they await future tourist and student interchange.

Other potential costs for Australia involve what a re-elected President Trump or a newly-elected President Biden would expect of Australia in the continuing US rivalry with China. A US crisis with China over Taiwan was among possible scenarios involving US demands for greater support that would pose very difficult choices for Australia.

Meanwhile, similar to the concern shown by specialists in other Indo-Pacific countries, Australian specialists worry about the longer-term durability of US regional leadership. They question US willingness to pay the costs of supporting and directing a sustained regional effort to counter a rising China. The capacity of the US government for effective action comes into question with the protracted US failure to manage the pandemic effectively and with the perception by some in Australia that President Trump demonstrates worrying erratic behavior and personal characteristics that work against steady US leadership seen as needed in the years ahead.

India



India does not share the consternation seen elsewhere in the Indo-Pacific about negative consequences resulting from US rivalry with China. In fact, India welcomes the US toughening toward China, seeing a variety of advantages for Indian security and economic interests. It prefers an American posture of continued firmness in dealing with what are seen as Chinese expansionist and negative advances at the expense of India and other countries. The prevailing judgment is that American domestic politics turning negatively against China is meeting Chinese firmness in pursuit of its own ambitions. Overall, this argues for continuity in the firm US policy going forward. Indian specialists did not raise the prospects of US-Chinese tensions leading to military conflict, anticipating rivalry well short of such conflict.

The Indian specialists report that India has become very familiar with President Trump and avers good knowledge of Vice President Biden through decades of experience with the veteran US foreign policy maker. There remains some uncertainty in India about President Trump's avowed unpredictability and proclivity to seek "deals" with China that might dilute US firmness toward China and adversely affect Indian interests. Conversely, Vice President Biden's nuanced approach to managing differences and seeking common ground with Beijing are among factors that might steer a Biden administration to move US policy toward substantial moderation toward Beijing.

India

The positive view from India of US-China rivalry is rooted in a common calculus that American preoccupation with countering Chinese challenges makes US policy much more attentive in seeking Indian support as a counterweight to China. In this process, US differences with India over trade issues, immigration, India's close relations with Russia and Iran, and human rights issues are said to become less important to US policy makers.

Caveats expressed by the specialists include apprehension that a re-elected President Trump might double down on an "America First" policy agenda pressing India for trade concessions and tightening Indian immigration to the United States. And there is worry that a Biden administration, influenced by various Democratic Party constituencies, would see a need to adopt policies critical of India's human rights practices and would pursue a version of an "America First" trade policy that would negatively impact Indian interests. Vice President Biden's reasons for possible moderation toward China also involve the Democrats' perceived need for Chinese cooperation as they seek forward movement on climate change and a revival of US involvement with the international agreement on Iran's nuclear program. Also cited were strong divisions among Biden advisors about priorities in dealing with China, with some seen favoring the more accommodating China policies of the Obama administration. Nevertheless, the caveats are balanced with the judgment that senior Trump administration officials follow a more consistent approach against China backed by extensive bipartisan congressional legislation. The administration officials work to tie down a second-term Trump or first-term Biden presidency to follow a firm approach targeting China.

The Indian specialists believe that India is in a good position to build advantageous security ties with the United States in the common effort to counter Chinese challenges. Unlike allies Japan, South Korea, and NATO, India is said to cost the United States little and thus has no burden-sharing, basing, and related disputes with the United States. India welcomes closer security and other consultations in the framework of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (or Quad, also involving Japan



An Indian army convoy drives towards Leh, on a highway bordering China, on June 19, 2020 in Gagangir, India. As many as 20 Indian soldiers were killed in a "violent face-off" with Chinese troops on June 15-16 in the Galwan Valley along the Himalayas. Photo: Yawar Nazir/Getty Images

and Australia), and highlights increased use of the Quad leading other Indo-Pacific and interested states in dealing with common international problems multilaterally. The specialists also applaud closer security collaboration among the Quad powers and other interested powers (e.g. France) and strengthening US bilateral alliances with Australia, Japan, and South Korea. Overall, the recent Quad developments are said to both reassure ASEAN and the region as well as serve as an insurance policy in the face of Chinese challenges. As in the past, India judges that moving toward an Asian NATO that the US might use to counter China would be adverse to Indian interests, and New Delhi would not join.

On economic issues, Indian specialists perceived more benefit than loss in recent US-China economic disputes. The decoupling seen thus far is often in line with Indian interests. India also is reassessing Chinese investments and links to telecom sectors. Chinese telecommunications company Huawei is blocked from state sectors and similar moves are underway regarding private telecom providers. New Delhi supports US-backed efforts to curb use of Chinese-provided technology in constructing 5G networks among fellow democracies. The government and businesses see opportunities for India as the United States

India

promotes reshoring efforts and investments to non-China alternatives. There remain costs, notably for startups and other Indian companies receiving substantial investment from China, but the past strong view that India should take advantage of Chinese investment is said to be fading amid broader Indian conflicts with China—most notably recent border skirmishes—and the pandemic hitting India hard, causing public opinion to shift negatively, even considering boycotts of Chinese products. Notable by its near absence in discussions were Indian expectations of a bilateral trade deal with the US amid the two countries' respective hardening on economic relations with China.

The Indian specialists did not dwell on the large US domestic problems involving strong political divisions combined with the devastation caused by the pandemic, widely seen elsewhere in the world to reflect negatively on the United States and its Indo-Pacific leadership. One reason is that India has worse problems regarding internal divisions and the response to the pandemic. Another reason is the success of the Indian American community and the view that the United States is still seen as a land of opportunity, with relative optimism in the US economy, innovation, and universities. The United States remains the largest destination for Indian study abroad. Meanwhile, an advantage for India in a US government preoccupied with domestic issues is that the United States is seen less inclined to stress ideals of free trade and human rights that can target India; a more pragmatic America focused in foreign affairs on the challenges to its interests posed by an expanding China is viewed as much more compatible with Indian interests.

Japan



Though preoccupied with the consequences of the pandemic economy, Japan gives top priority in foreign affairs to the US-China rivalry, which is seen to have very important consequences for Japan.

Japanese specialists broadly welcome President Trump's tough US approach toward China, but judge that the American approach has become too hardline, particularly with a recent strong ideological emphasis against the Chinese Communist Party that is seen as targeted at containment of and regime change in China. Meanwhile, the marked escalation of unilateral US actions countering Chinese challenges in recent months adds to stark and broadly negative implications for Japan's security and economic interests, without laying out clear sustainable goals that American allies and partners can support.

Japan admonished former President Obama to pay more attention to China's threats. Against that background, Japanese elite and public opinion is different from other US allies in supporting President Trump and the harder administration approach to Beijing. However, Japan favors what one specialist called "a multilayered approach" in which the recently emphasized layer of strong competition with China would be married to a layer of efforts to sustain some mutually beneficial cooperation with China.

The specialists highlighted substantial downsides for Japan and for the US regional allies and partners in a continuation of the recent US emphasis on systematic competition with China broadly seen as morphing into containment.

First, in the Indo-Pacific region, unilateral US actions alienate Japan and others seeking to work more closely with the United States. US administration leaders seem preoccupied with China at the expense of attention to the concerns and interests of allies and partners. In this view, US Asia policy features as a small subset of US China policy,

US Asia policy features as a small subset of US China policy, turning off many in Japan who otherwise are inclined to cooperate in supporting the rules-based regional order threatened by China

turning off many in Japan and others in countries like Singapore who otherwise are inclined to cooperate with the United States in supporting the rules-based regional order threatened by China.

Second, regarding the South China Sea, China's assertive expansion has alarmed many Asian governments, resulting in greater interest in US engagement. However, Japan believes effective US engagement requires not just a focus on China but an understanding of broader interests of Asian partners and the importance of growing arrangements among regional powers, such as closer Australia-Japan security cooperation, that could be mobilized through cooperative multilateral efforts actively involving the United States to sustain a stable and strong order countering Chinese coercion.

Third, on economics, US tariffs, export controls, investment restrictions, and the resulting disruption of production chains have surprised Japanese businesses now compelled to adjust business strategies in a period of increased decoupling. The US drive is seen to be strongly reinforced by intense US competition with China to lead in developing the high technology industries of the future. Japanese businesspeople and policymakers see only vague US plans for a new economic order based on two separating world economies that will require major



As the COVID-19 pandemic continues, Japan has seen a 24 percent increase in the number of companies that suspended, closed, or dissolved in the period from January to August compared to the previous year. The amount of businesses closing in 2020 is anticipated to exceed 50,000 in for the first time on record since 2000. Photo: Carl Court/Getty Images

adjustment costs for Japan and other regional countries. In the absence of US consultations with allies and partners and the administration's rejection of some and neglect of other regional multilateral efforts, some governments are forecast to seek closer economic ties with China.

Looking ahead, Japanese specialists see a generally hardline US approach toward China continuing into 2021. A re-elected President Trump will not seek a new grand bargain with Beijing and will have a difficult time even if he were to attempt to do so because of US congressional and broader domestic opposition to China in making progress in negotiations on economic or other issues. President Trump is expected to preserve the Phase One trade deal and possibly advance talks on such matters.

A newly-elected President Biden would also be constrained in easing tensions with China, but he is seen as anxious to negotiate with China over climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic, and other issues of common concern, and might play down differences in the interest of progress in those areas. In opposition to the Trump administration's unilateralism, a Biden administration emphasis on working closely with

Japan

allies and partners in multilateral arrangements is broadly welcomed in Japan. However, one anticipated complication for Japan is that a Biden administration would likely place stronger emphasis on human rights, meaning stronger US pressure on Japan to take tougher positions against Chinese human rights practices that Japan sought to avoid in the past in light of economic and other Japanese interests in China.

South Korea



South Korea is seen as very exposed and vulnerable to negative fallout from the intensifying US-China rivalry. A prevailing assumption is that a tough US policy toward China will continue in 2021 and strong Chinese retaliation will follow South Korean moves to align with the United States in the rivalry with China. South Korea joining US efforts to restrict Huawei and other Chinese high technology companies, and South Korea working more closely with US security measures in the Indo-Pacific such as purported deployment of longer-range US missile systems in South Korea, are salient examples of actions that would prompt harsh Chinese countermeasures against South Korea, recalling the estimated over \$20 billion economic losses South Korea endured in allowing the US deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile defense system in South Korea against strenuous Chinese objections.

Korean specialists judge that as the US-China rivalry intensifies, US pressure on South Korea to do more against China will grow. For South Korea, charting a path forward in this dilemma is compounded by the distinct possibility that President Trump's avowed unpredictability and strong interest in making deals advantageous to his "America First" agenda would lead to a US-China breakthrough that would undermine US allies taking a tougher stance toward China.



South Korean decision-making on the US-China rivalry is complicated by its relationship with North Korea. North Korea's nuclear weapons development and threatening posture toward South Korea enhances the importance of close alliance with the United States, but also requires Seoul to work with both Washington and Beijing. Photo: Chung Sung-Jun/Getty Images

Vice President Biden is seen as favoring a nuanced China policy leaving open cooperation on important issues such as climate change that could prompt a thaw with China, jeopardizing US allies that have joined efforts to counter China's challenges. A bottom line for some South Korean planners is that there is no clear goal for the tougher US policy toward China, while US actions concerning Korea in the US Indo-Pacific strategy are seen as weak, with one specialist suggesting that American forces are actually moving away from forward support on the Korean Peninsula to a posture of off-shore balancing.

Other facts are also complicating South Korean decision-making on the US-China rivalry. First, North Korea's nuclear weapons development and threatening posture toward South Korea, which enhances the importance of close alliance with the United States, requires Seoul to work with both Washington and Beijing. Second, the high priority that the current, progressive South Korean president continues to give to improving relations with North Korea despite profound obstacles, enhances the importance of working cooperatively with China as well as the United States to influence North Korea. Third, the unprecedented pressures from the Trump administration for major increases in South

South Korea

Korean host nation support for US forces deployed in South Korea and repeated disparaging remarks by President Trump about South Korea that alienate South Korean public opinion also complicate the government's management of relations with both the United States and China.

The perceived economic costs of the US-China rivalry are particularly salient in South Korea. South Korean businesses are deeply interconnected with the Chinese market and production chains involving China. They are profit-oriented and thus far are ignorant of or unpersuaded by arguments of the national security dangers posed by Huawei and other high technology firms being restricted by the United States. The specialists advise that South Korea joins other American allies and partners in Asia in requesting a much clearer US justification for the ongoing economic decoupling of the United States from China and the security risks posed by Chinese firms. Also requested by Korean specialists are clearer alternatives that US allies and partners could use to compensate for cutting off Chinese firms. The specialists advise that South Korean public opinion has turned against China in recent years and could be receptive to US arguments on the need to decouple from China. However, they add that South Korea saw little support from the United States as it faced Chinese retaliation over the THAAD

South Korean businesses are profit-oriented and thus far are ignorant of or unpersuaded by arguments of the national security dangers posed by high technology firms being restricted by the US

South Korea

deployment. South Korean specialists are uncertain that US support would come in the expected event of Chinese retaliation prompted by South Korea joining the United States in countering Chinese companies.

South Korean specialists see no substantial positive advantage for South Korea in the US-China rivalry. South Korean companies might get some short-term gain as the US sanctions and disengages from Chinese firms. Also, the United States might ease pressures on South Korea on host nation support, defense burden-sharing, and trade disputes as it seeks allied support to counter China. However, that has not been the case up to now.

South Korean specialists are heavily focused on South Korea's interests in dealing with the US-China rivalry. They register interest in regional and global concerns over the rivalry when those concerns underscore South Korean complaints over US policy. For now, economic concerns are primary, followed by security concerns. Issues of values, including human rights and democracy, are not part of these discussions.

Looking ahead, there is considerable worry about US resiliency in facing rising Chinese power. China is seen as recovering well from the pandemic while the United States is lagging far behind. South Korean specialists pay close attention to US political divisions, what is viewed as inconsistent and sometimes chaotic policymaking, and massive domestic problems. Against the background of perceived overextended US defense commitments, big strategic setbacks for US military involvement in Southwest Asia, current setbacks in dealing with the pandemic, and massive domestic divisions, sober Korean assessments warn that continuation of such negative trends in the next four years would raise serious questions in South Korea on how to proceed in its alliance with the United States in relation to a rising China's influence on and importance to South Korea.

Southeast Asia



According to Southeast Asian specialists, strong US rivalry with China is expected to continue after the American elections, posing opportunities for Vietnam but also some concerns and problems for other regional governments. Each of the leading regional states follows its own path in seeking the proper balance for its interests in dealing with conflicting pressures and positive incentives coming from China and the United States. The result is varying patterns of hedging with some, like Thailand, currently tilting toward China, and others, like Vietnam, currently tilting toward the United States.

In charting the way forward, Southeast Asian governments consult with one another as well as with other concerned countries, including Japan, India, and South Korea, on the US-China rivalry. But the role of a collective regional response via ASEAN or other groups is secondary to individual state autonomy on this subject. The strong negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and accompanying economic recession make the US rivalry with China much less important for the challenged and struggling governments in Thailand and Indonesia. Bangkok and Jakarta, along with other Southeast Asian governments, give high priority to Chinese pledges to provide COVID-19 vaccinations, and they view China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as an important immediate contributor to economic revival. The US government trade war with China and so-called economic decoupling disrupt the China-centered production chains that Southeast Asian governments have relied on to foster growth. Only Vietnam sees significant benefit while others see significant costs. US plans for investment and financing to compete with China remain to be determined and do not yet compete effectively with China's BRI.

Meanwhile, recently bolstered US military, diplomatic, and economic involvement in Southeast Asia is broadly welcomed in the region. However, specialists also indicated that the accompanying strident American emphasis on China as a threat undermines regional support for the United States. Governments in Hanoi and Singapore give high priority to encouraging consistent and resolved American involvement as a counterweight to Chinese pressures, but they join others in seeing US attention to the region as episodic and erratic. The Trump administration's view of China as a whole-of-government threat is seen to have poorly defined goals. The US view seems extreme and unsustainable in the region and garners little support. Southeast Asian specialists acknowledge that a re-elected President Trump or a newly-elected President Biden might attempt a reset with Beijing, which might in turn ease regional concerns over US stridency; but depending on its terms, the reset also might add to concerns over erratic and inconsistent US-Southeast Asian involvement.

Vietnam

Hanoi gives top priority to the US rivalry with China. Among positive trends for Vietnam, Hanoi welcomes the Trump administration's policies toward China and specifically against Chinese illegal claims and bullying Vietnam and other claimants in the South China Sea. It also hopes for a firm and consistent American policy against China that would allow Vietnam to leverage greater strategic attention it receives from the United States to both upgrade relations with Washington and enhance military and other capacities to deal with China. The US trade war with China has brought some benefits to Vietnam in terms of trade and investment diversion from China.

Among concerns are the resulting large increase in Vietnam's trade surplus with the United States, which a re-elected President Trump might focus on that could possibly result in punitive tariffs and other pressures. President Trump has largely ignored Vietnam's record of repression of human rights, but a newly-elected President Biden and his policy advisers would be much more concerned about human rights issues abroad and may press Hanoi on this matter, leading to

an impasse. Vietnam's specialists also foresee a possible thaw in US tension with China as potentially disadvantageous to Vietnam, notably if President Trump seeks advantageous trade or other deals with Beijing, or if a Biden administration seeks China's cooperation over climate change, Iran, or other priorities. The specialists reiterate that Hanoi has no intention of aligning with the United States in efforts seeking to contain China's expansion, though it works cooperatively with the four-power Quad in areas like countering the COVID-19 pandemic, which is seen as unlikely to result in harsh Chinese countermeasures against Vietnam.

Singapore

Singapore also gives top priority attention to the US-China rivalry. The city-state's large-scale investment from the United States and ever-closer US military ties mean that relations reflect a "weighted equilibrium" in favor of the United States. Nevertheless, Singapore is heavily integrated with China's economy. China repeatedly exerts pressure against Singapore aligning closely with the United States and Singapore standing against China's preferences on the contested South China Sea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and other sensitive matters. Though the Singaporean government and society are more resilient than neighbors in facing the twin challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and the related economic recession,

Singapore strongly disapproves of harsh US measures disrupting China-centered production chains supporting Singaporean interests

the influential business community is relying on China's BRI and other economic opportunities to achieve needed growth. The government strongly disapproves of harsh US measures disrupting China-centered production chains supporting Singaporean interests and it takes a dim view of sharp rhetoric by leading US officials calling for across-the-board opposition to the Chinese party-state and its practices.

A carefully crafted tougher US policy toward China is generally welcome in Singapore. Some Singaporean specialists advise that prior to the firmer pushback by the US against China, there was a growing fear that China's dominance of the region was inevitable. However, Singapore seeks "consistency, continuity, and predictability" in the US approach and has been disappointed by the US episodic attention and lack of consultation with regional governments in undertaking seemingly unilateral actions against China that negatively impact Southeast Asian countries.

The specialists see possible pros and cons with a Biden administration. A Biden administration would likely pay more attention to restoring the US position in the world, and thereby give more positive attention to Southeast Asia and ASEAN and related multilateral groups. It also might tone down anti-China rhetoric in ways that would allow Singapore more freedom of movement in dealing with China while also sustaining a US firm stance against Chinese coercion and expansion at others' expense. A Democratic administration also is forecast to devote greater attention to human rights and an avowed emphasis on aligning with democracies abroad; such changes could lead to complications with Singapore if not handled discreetly.

Problems foreseen with a second-term Trump administration include further decline in US world standing and continued practices of unilateralism, neglect of smaller powers, isolationism, and unpredictability that overall would undermine US regional influence as China advances. Like specialists in South Korea and Japan, Singaporean specialists worry about longer term American decline. Continued overreach seen in US military forces deployed

in various global hot spots, the poor record in dealing effectively with the COVID-19 pandemic, the decline of the US economy, and acute partisan divides on salient domestic problems were evidence of a possible end of American leadership, especially in areas far away from Washington like Southeast Asia.

Malaysia

A claimant in the disputed South China Sea, Malaysia is very attentive to the US-China rivalry but more discreet than Singapore or Vietnam in avoiding actions that would appear to support the tough US approach to China. Malaysia has developed close military ties with the United States up to now, but they are rarely publicized, in part out of deference to China's sensitivities, but also due to domestic sensitivities. The United States took the initiative to send warships earlier this year to face Chinese forces intimidating a Malaysian oil and gas survey vessel in South China Sea areas claimed by Malaysia in line with the Law of the Sea but nonetheless disputed by China; the Malaysian foreign minister was publicly critical and not supportive of the US move.

Such Malaysian hedging in the US-China rivalry involves a very delicate balancing game that generally avoids calling out Beijing. Malaysia is said to strive to guide relations with China along a moderate path where China would become more accommodating and less demanding. Adding economic impetus to keep on good terms with China is Malaysia's strong integration with China and Chinese-centered production chains. US harsh economic measures against Beijing undermine those Malaysian interests. Some foreseen advantages of a Biden presidency are that US involvement with the region might be more attentive, stable, and predictable. Vice President Biden was seen as better than President Trump as a responsible international actor adhering to a rules-based order and multilateralism in line with the interests of Malaysia and other states in Southeast Asia.

Thailand & Indonesia

Both countries are heavily impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting economic downturn. Thailand and to a lesser degree

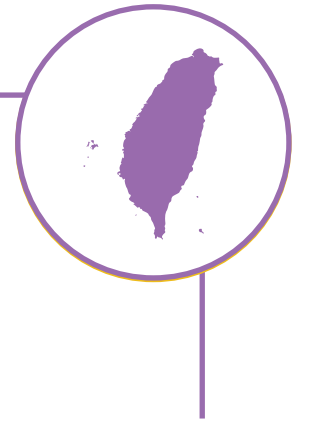
Southeast Asia

Indonesia also face serious domestic political opposition. Against this background, the governments' attention to US-China rivalry is generally secondary. Meanwhile, China looms large as a current good option for rapid access to vaccines against the virus and an engine of economic growth for the struggling regional economies.

The Thai government's top priority is to sustain stability in a volatile domestic environment. The US election appears to matter much less. Thailand seeks to sustain the defense alliance with the United States, but it devotes increasing attention to China and is building closer Chinese military ties to complement already close economic relations. US willingness to compete is hampered by the implications of the military coup of 2014, which lingers today as coup perpetrators remain in power and the domestic situation in Thailand remains tense.

The Indonesian government is busy with the COVID-19 pandemic and a poor economy rather than with the US-China rivalry. China is considered very important in both of those matters, and the United States is not. The US trade war with China disrupts China-centered production chains, which hurts some Indonesian businesses; Indonesia is seen as not in a position to take advantage of possible opportunities coming from diverted trade and investment. There are many complaints about lack of US attention to Indonesia, harsh US criticism of China on matters that count for less with Indonesian leaders seeking pragmatic deals with China to revive the economy, and the sharp decline in the US image in Indonesia as a result of the poor American response to the COVID-19 pandemic as well as seemingly chaotic politics in the United States.

Taiwan



Taiwan elites and public give top priority to relations with the United States, US rivalry with China, and implications for Taiwan. Taiwan has benefited greatly from the tough American approach to China during the Trump administration. The US election is watched closely throughout Taiwan, more closely than Taiwan's own hard-fought election campaigns. The main concern is whether the Trump administration's strong support for Taiwan militarily, economically, and diplomatically will continue. That support has been without precedent since before the break in US relations with Taiwan over 40 years ago.

Taiwan is at the forefront of ever more threatening Chinese military and paramilitary intrusions and shows of force, diplomatic pressures further isolating Taiwan, and cyber, clandestine, and other political warfare intrusions to destabilize the Taiwan government and society. Unlike the Obama administration and its perceived focus on avoiding escalating tension with China over Taiwan, the Trump government has publicly and repeatedly sided with Taiwan, conducted military operations countering China's military intimidation efforts, sold unprecedented amounts of advanced weapons to Taiwan, and worked in partnership with Taiwan against China's international isolation efforts. These initiatives provide much needed reassurance that Taiwan hopes will continue.

Even though Taiwan expectations, like those of others in Asia, are that the overall tough American policy toward China will continue into 2021, there is acute concern that a Biden victory would lead to a return to the Obama government's restrained support for Taiwan, seeking to avoid escalating tensions with Beijing over Taiwan issues. Taiwan worries that

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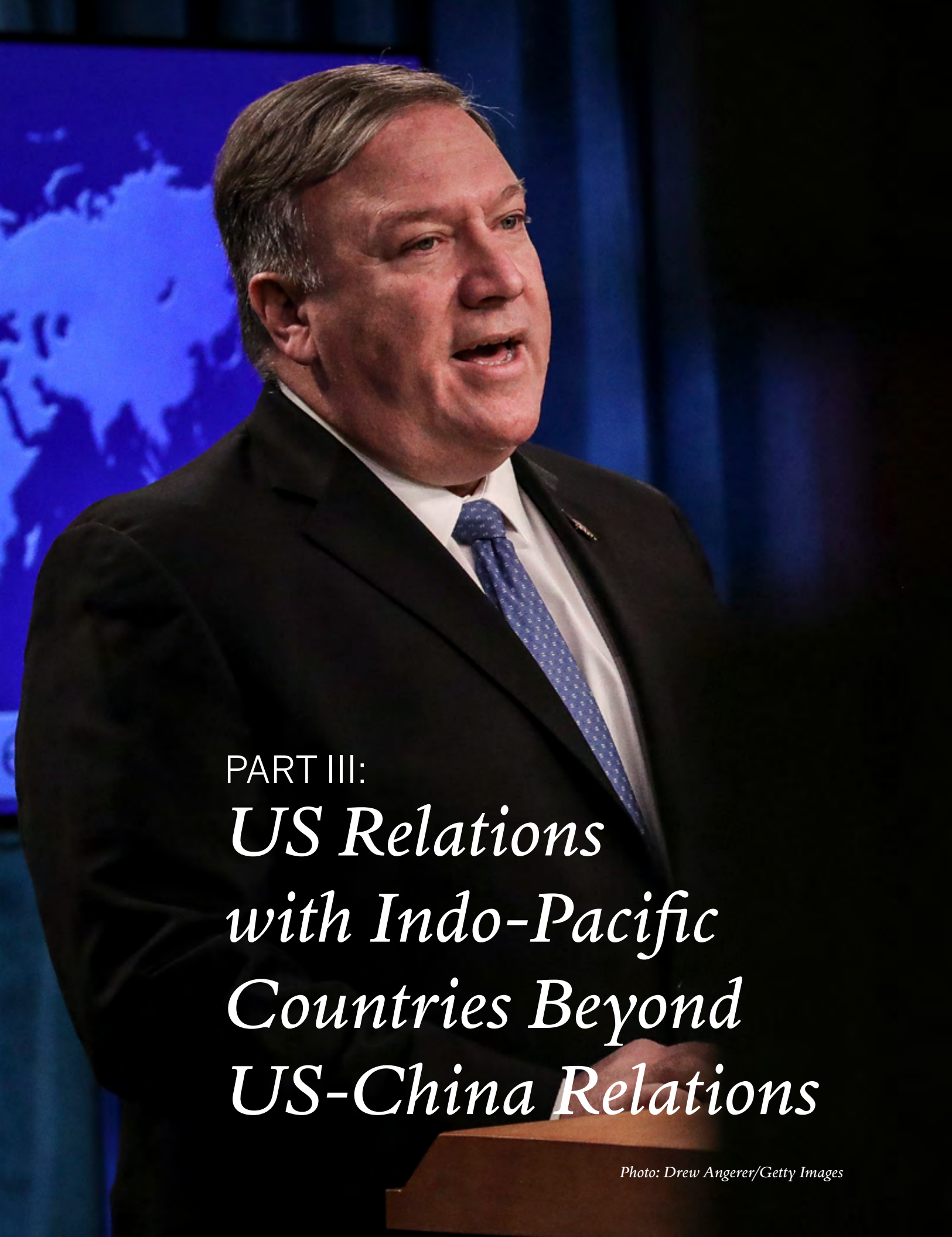
the many Trump administration public demonstrations of American support militarily, diplomatically, and economically will be cut back in the interests of resuming closer Biden administration consultations with Beijing over pressing international problems like climate change and over managing the tensions in the US-China relations. Specialists point to the presence in the Biden camp of many senior advisors who have long been viewed as favoring Taiwan being kept at arms-length in seeking broader US objectives with Beijing.

Taiwan worries much less than others in the region about purported extremes in Trump administration rhetoric and actions against China as a systemic, ideological threat warranting countermeasures seen comparable to the containment of the Cold War. Taiwan is pleased that the United States has “woken up” to these Chinese challenges which Taiwan has faced for many years. President Trump's avowed unpredictability and record of abrupt unilateral decisions is a cause of concern, with Taiwan worried that he may sacrifice close support for Taiwan for a deal with Beijing benefiting the United States. However, on balance, Taiwan strongly favors the president's re-election.

Taiwan does not share the worry seen elsewhere in the region that the United States does not have the capacity to sustain the current tough

policy toward China. As noted above, it worries much more about a change in priorities under a Biden administration returning to treating Taiwan with an eye toward avoiding trouble with Beijing,

Taiwan recognizes the downsides for Taiwan and many others in Asia of disrupted international production chains because of Trump administration punitive tariffs and export and investment controls leading to disengagement from China. However, it is working cooperatively with the Trump government in high technology development and reshoring manufacturing from China to other locations including the US. Taiwan also welcomes efforts in the Trump government's Indo Pacific strategy for Taiwan's closer involvement with other democracies in Asia and Europe as well as North America to protect the integrity of their rules based democratic and free-market systems from increasing Chinese challenges.



PART III:
*US Relations
with Indo-Pacific
Countries Beyond
US-China Relations*

Photo: Drew Angerer/Getty Images

Australia



The United States and China are the most important countries to Australia; though the profile of its relationship with each is profoundly different. In recent decades, Australia has been said to be comfortable being a US ally and a commercial partner of China because US-China relations were either relatively constructive or, at minimum, a managed competition. Today, and for the foreseeable future, these conditions no longer hold.

Australia itself has a hardening, negative position on China. On the whole, Canberra's increasing worries about China's regional role, combined with a desire to protect itself from over-reliance on China economically, suggests opportunities to shore up both the alliance and commercial ties with the United States and its other allies and partners.

However, a further consolidation of the alliance also poses challenges for Australia. For example, Australian experts debate about their country's possible response to a Taiwan contingency. Some flag earlier historical efforts by Canberra to remain in a "middle ground" while others emphasize that, with the presence today (unlike in earlier eras) of joint US-Australia military and intelligence facilities, Australia is "in already" in the event of any contingency and responses that arise. And in such a scenario, Australians wonder how much their country could contribute given the size and capabilities of its military.

However, well below the very charged scenario of a Taiwan contingency implicating the alliance with the US, Australian specialists also worry about what they expect to be much greater expectations from Washington of Australia both bilaterally in alliance terms (e.g., defense spending and aligned actions), but also for assistance in

the region. This comes at a time when Australia's own Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) budgets are constrained.

Australian experts seem to agree that the United States, regardless of the next administration, will demand more from Australia as and because the United States will itself draw down activities and commitments in the region. This might well occur even under conditions of more predictability and stability of foreign policy but a primacy on domestic issues if Vice President Biden were elected.

Given this outlook, the Australian specialists point out that their country has ramped up relations with other regional countries such as Japan and even India. However, there is a view among Australian experts that Southeast Asia has yet to attract significant resources and strategic attention. Even the all-important relationship with Indonesia faces constraints emanating from both countries. The one heavy, unchallenged Australian focus is the Pacific Islands region—where it was said that the United States does not have to convince Canberra to do and spend more.

The growing weight of wider Asia in Australian calculations under conditions of intensifying US-China rivalry also highlights what at least a minority of Australian experts assert are different US and Australian interests in the region. Though unmentioned, it is not clear why Australia might not also have very different interests from China in the region. Australia's public posture is very negative toward China's action in the region—many such differences seem already well defined.

There are other upsides and downsides of the intensifying US-China rivalry and Australia's own hardening trajectory in China policy. One downside is reduced purchases by Beijing of some Australian commodities. However, in fact, other experts point out that Australia-China trade under current tensions actually have increased—mainly because China continues to buy commodities it needs while reducing purchases of those it does not.

Australians debate the specific and sectoral upsides or downsides of US-China economic decoupling given the nature and structure of Australia's economy. Nevertheless, Australia has been in general alignment with the United States on tightening trade, FDI, technology, and education linkages that could be used in China's economic statecraft to legally and illegally acquire technology to support military advances. On the other hand, Australia favors a global trading order and US-China economic decoupling could place pressures on the global system on which Australia relies particularly for commodity and agricultural exports.

According to one Australian specialist, the "biggest positive" of the heightened US-China rivalry is that the current ramped-up tensions are making Australia think deeply about strategy in a way that it really has not had to for over 70 years. One unexpected downside for Australia of the more intense US-China rivalry is more complicated domestic and federal-state relations—such as Australian states having BRI projects that are opposed by the Australian federal government.

Australians do not expect major changes in US-China relations, regardless of who wins the 2020 election. They estimate that a Biden administration would bring greater stability and predictability, but not a softer policy towards China. Australian

Current US-China tensions are making Australia think deeply about strategy in a way that it really has not had to for over 70 years

Australia

specialists express some doubt about the US public and congressional willingness to shoulder the costs of acute, sustained rivalry with China. They also question the consensus of various domestic US constituencies about a sustained and resolute approach to the rivalry.

Australian specialist views on US power and commitment are decidedly mixed, with one saying “hawkish circles” are confident in the United States while more “moderate, pragmatic circles” want to see the US active in the region but are uncertain that it can and will be. Just as there are questions in Australia about the trajectory of the United States, there are also questions about China’s future—though these seem to prevail more among China experts than more broadly. Most Australian experts believe that China will rebound economically and continue to be important to their country’s economic health.

India



India is comparatively sanguine about the implications of the increasing rivalry between the United States and China for its national interests and relations with Washington. Indian experts mostly expect the rivalry to endure regardless of the 2020 presidential election outcome, and have confidence that America will remain resilient and capable in such a contest. On these grounds alone, India presents a contrast by degree with most other Indo-Pacific countries.

Conversely, Indian interlocutors express more pessimism about other matters shaping bilateral relations, expect few positive developments emanating on those fronts regardless of the 2020 election outcome, and therefore see the overall outlook for bilateral relations as mixed. India’s ideal US policy, would be, said one colleague, “a hardening China policy, and a softening India policy.” Specifically, India hopes for a permanently “hard” US position on China, a tougher position on Pakistan, greater accommodation of India’s Russian military supply relationship and diplomatic ties with Iran, and understanding of India’s human rights and democracy challenges—challenges that Indian specialists see as not so different from the ones faced by the United States. Indian analysts hope for “softening” on trade, foreign direct investment, high technology access, immigration of high-skilled workers, and climate change. Several Indian colleagues note that while their country is increasingly aligned with the United States regarding China, they perceive little softening evident from the US side in other areas of bilateral relations.

Despite general bonhomie and comparatively high approval ratings in India for the United States, the two countries are managing differences on many fronts. Still, a Biden administration is generally seen as posing



Kashmir Muslim women protesters shout during a protest against Indian rule and the revocation of Kashmir's special status on August 30, 2019. Kashmir has been a state under siege, with both India and Pakistan laying claim to it. Photo: Yawar Nazir/Getty Images

more unpredictability for India. While Vice President Biden himself is a known quantity given his long tenure in US politics, especially in his role as chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and Vice President in the Obama administration, and despite Senator Kamala Harris' ethnic connections to India, a Biden administration appears to our Indian interlocutors as likely to exacerbate anxiety in Delhi beyond the imperfect stasis under a second Trump administration.

There is also worry that a new Biden administration and a Democratic-majority Congress would press India much harder on Kashmir, human rights, and democracy. Even though a Biden administration is expected to be as tough as the Trump administration has been on China regarding human rights—particularly in Xinjiang, Tibet, and Hong Kong—a Biden administration is not expected to be as “China-centric” as the Trump administration on human rights and democracy issues—hence likely to increase pressures on India as well as other countries ranging from the Philippines to Indonesia to Poland. The move from a Trump administration seen as downplaying human rights protections except where China is involved to a more values-based approach was seen by Indian specialists as having potentially inadvertent but still

complicating effects on their country. A specific example cited is that India could get caught up in anti-slavery legislation directed at Xinjiang.

Commercial relations present a mixed picture for US-India relations as well. One Indian specialist acknowledges that “India had missed a trick on a mini-trade deal being negotiated with the Trump administration due to a failure to follow through and give it a win.” Others point out that, from India's perspective, it has witnessed a negative trend in the US-Indian trade relationship because of the focus on bilateral trade deficits, hard bargaining on GSP access, sector-specific deals, and tariffs rather than an overall framework compatible with international rules—sometimes lumped together as the Trump administration's transactional approach to trade. Indian interlocutors note that while Democratic centrists are less skeptical on trade, progressive wings of the party are less open to new trade agreements; and certainly not new trade agreements with high standards for labor and environment and even human rights that India may find difficult to meet. Indian experts believe a more “left” trade agenda in the United States is likely to lean towards autarky and isolationism. More broadly, India also worries about exclusion from discussions on reforming international trade institutions like the WTO and IMF—regardless of the US administration.

India also wants to see continued commitment to free flow of capital especially in the post-COVID-19 pandemic era to emerging economies. This is all the more important as global FDI has been declining. India fears that any US administration from here on out is likely to demand companies to repatriate capital to the United States.

One Indian specialist argued that there was unlikely to be a “substantive difference on technology controls” between a Trump or Biden administration. The United States would still privilege an “America First” agenda on indigenization of supply chains, quantum computing, artificial intelligence, 5G communications, and semi-conductor technology, among other areas. The impacts on India of a generally sustained trend of US technology regulation, protection, and onshoring would be complex, but likely to reduce Indian access rather than expand it. This

might be marginally offset by a broad US and Indian convergence on decoupling from China. India, especially in the wake of the mid-2020 Sino-Indian border clashes, has taken its own steps to decouple from China's economy. Decoupling from China is less costly for India than some other countries given its modest integration with international production and supply chains—including those with heavy engagement in China. However, there are still many Indian firms and startups that welcome or rely on Chinese investment or Chinese technology, and further decoupling could cause short-term suffering for them.

A slightly more positive view prevailed regarding future access of high-skilled Indian workers to the United States via the H1B and other specialized visa programs—especially under a Biden administration. But even here it was noted that recently Vice President Biden has been calling for a version of “buy and make in America” that could put limits on Indian labor mobility.³⁹

Indian experts share a range of apprehension and expectations regarding climate change—likely a sign of their expectation that India is likely to come under further pressures. Indian experts do not expect passage of the US Green New Deal—though they see the Biden administration as much more likely to return to international agreements on climate change such as the Paris agreement. Under a Biden administration, India may come under scrutiny for being an advocate for the greater adoption of nuclear energy. If Vice President Biden wins and there is, as expected, a recommitment to the Paris targets, it would not meet India's primary concerns. India's primary concerns are whether the United States re-examines its very limited commitments to financial and technology transfers to developing countries to meet climate change and emissions targets. India worries that so far discussion of the Green New Deal as filtered through the Democratic Party platform does not consider the rest of the world at all. Indians see in US climate change politics little thought beyond Paris and what the US commitment will be over the next few years on climate change more generally. India perceives that the Biden platform takes a step backward and mentions the environment on trade issues and strategic partnerships. India would

be happy to talk about the environment as part of shared commitment to renewable energy, but hopes that the relationship has moved beyond putting the strategic partnership back on the trade agenda.

On strategic issues beyond China, India specialists do not expect easy relations with Washington regardless of the next administration. For example, there is significant concern regarding Vice President Biden and other Democrats' strong criticism of Russia, which would be problematic for India's more pro-Russian policies and reliance on military purchases from Russia. Specifically, a pending waiver for India under the US Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) regulations remains to be decided. An American drawdown in Afghanistan as well as continued and possibly even greater reliance on Pakistan to assist with post-withdrawal US interests would complicate India's security challenges to its west. While a Biden administration would not be expected to be as confrontational as the Trump administration regarding Iran, this may well depend on China's inroads with Tehran and be shaped by EU and NATO allies' views more than those of Delhi, mainly because of the nature of their close ties to the United States and being party to the agreement with Iran.

India specialists do not expect easy relations with Washington regardless of the next administration

India

In sum, India views China and the likely trajectory of US-China relations as a ballast to bilateral relations with the United States. But this basic alignment does not presage a move to alliance with Washington, and does not compensate for or attenuate a range of other complicated and differing areas of bilateral relations. For a large, inward-oriented developing country such as India, alignment with Washington on the key global strategic challenge of the era does not promise significant narrowing, much less resolution, of bilateral differences that are critical to the country's future regardless of who is the US president after 2020.

Japan



The intensifying US-China rivalry is the key foreign relations factor for Japan's government and business community and a topic that is before the public almost every day in the media. However, the most immediate priority for Japanese policymakers is post-COVID-19 pandemic economic recovery. Beyond re-establishing high standards of public health and reviving the economy, Japan has broader interests related to but not entirely dependent upon China or the US-China rivalry.

First, Japan has an interest in preserving a rules-based liberal international order, including globalization, which provides avenues for Tokyo to pursue its diplomatic and commercial interests. Japan is an increasingly active global diplomatic actor and, as the third largest economy, has worldwide commercial engagement.

One colleague said Japan therefore needs a “multilayered” system; allowing Tokyo to navigate and leverage the layers. These layers can encompass an alliance with Washington, constructive commercial ties with China, a range of relationships and even coalitions across Asia, and participation in multilateral groupings. A polarized and concentrated US-China rivalry as the only “layer” therefore would not serve Tokyo's interests.

In the context of a rules-based, liberal international order protecting Japan's interests, there is intense worry about impacts on Japan's businesses of the direction in US-China economic relations. These businesses have become increasingly worried over the past few months about the pressures they face directly and indirectly from US efforts to decouple from the Chinese economy. Japanese businesses

are not entirely opposed to these efforts; they have their own reasons to relocate and diversify their supply chains not only due to worries about China, but also for niche commercial reasons and to protect production in the COVID-19 environment. According to one Japanese expert closely monitoring the situation, the amount of funding for which Japanese companies applied to the government to help with relocating their businesses from China was eleven times the amount in the fund. As the United States pushes for a clean network and the economic prosperity network among allies and strategic partners, there is the danger for Japanese companies of not only “de-integrating” from China, but a further diminution of globalization, which has been such a boon to globally competitive Japanese businesses.

Particularly in the area of technology, there is something of a gap between a United States that focuses on the strategic and security elements of the technology competition and a Japanese approach that is more focused on commercial aspects. Japanese policymakers and security experts are well-aligned with the United States on military concerns about China’s acquisition of technology, but Japan’s civilian-oriented commercial sector is simply less aware of this dimension. One result of this gap is that Japanese businesses are especially critical of the extra-territoriality of US decisions about technology controls imposed on China.

A second Japanese priority beyond the US-China dyad is the broader Asian or Indo-Pacific region. To nearly every Japanese expert, this interest in the region is not just dependent on or derivative of a policy towards China. Japanese experts worry that the United States, unlike China, pays insufficient attention to the rest of Asia where Japan has significant interests in building relationships and coalitions of cooperation not only as an element of its own China strategy but also to achieve specific bilateral, commercial and strategic objectives. Japanese experts complain that even when the United States does engage the wider region, it does so by emphasizing only the hard line against China (e.g., in the latest declaration on the South China Sea) and less in terms of building a coalition to create a common approach

to China. Japanese experts cited the Singaporean Prime Minister’s complaint that this has the effect of narrowing strategic space for them to support the United States—which has presumably the same effect on Japan. What is required, in some Japanese views, is that the United States be more cautious in its intensely competitive approach with China when it deals with other countries in the region for the purpose of building robust relations rather than alienating them.

A third element of importance to Japan is multilateralism. Japanese experts call for more emphasis on multilateralism and US consultation with allies. They consider President Trump’s approach to have been far less consultative and more unilateral—despite a relatively well-managed bilateral relationship between President Trump and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. Recent US unilateralism, especially on commercial and technological decisions, have extra-territorial features that complicate the ability of Japan’s government and private sector to make decisions and manage their interests. Japanese interlocutors say that this is especially true regarding decisions on technology and trade, which have huge implications for Japan’s global engagement as the third largest economy.

While arguing for a return by the United States to robust multilateralism and

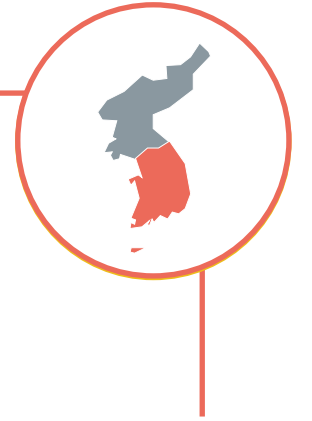
Recent US unilateral decisions have extra-territorial features that complicate the ability of Japan to make decisions and manage their interests

Japan

consultation with partners, especially as it relates to commercial and technology matters, it is understood and expected that this may require Japan to make some very tough choices on issues ranging from human rights to economic decoupling to technology. For example, Japan would have a difficult time standing apart from a hard-won consensus among allies and partners spearheaded by a Biden administration to impose multilateral sanctions on Hong Kong or Xinjiang officials for human rights violations. In the area of economic decoupling, for example, agreements reached by the United States and its allies and strategic partners, say on supply chain resilience, would be very difficult for Japan to reject. The bottom line is that while multilateral mechanisms are desirable by Japan for consultative purposes, Japanese experts are clear-eyed that decisions reached in such forums could reduce Japan's autonomy for decision-making—offset only by the fact that Japan would be in the meetings to help shape outcomes.

Overall Japanese views about US standing, credibility, and capability are bleak; though it is worth noting that these attitudes wax and wane. Japanese experts on foreign affairs generally, and especially experts on the United States itself, see a country that is inward-focused, acutely polarized and facing huge social and economic challenges exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. One leading Japanese expert on the United States says bluntly that there are “huge doubts” about the United States and “it is not just a Trump thing, it's the general trend of the US.”

South Korea



Managing the US alliance is the single most important “bilateral” agenda item for South Korea. As already discussed, growing rivalry between the United States and China complicates this management in multiple ways. Korean specialists wonder what the goals, timeframe, and division of labor among allies will be in an environment in which the alliance has to contend with US-China confrontation.

More specifically, South Korean specialists say it would be immensely controversial to have a more flexible United States Forces Korea (USFK) force posture to address regional contingencies—breaking the requirement for USFK to be singularly focused on deterring North Korea. The debate on flexibility of forces is not entirely new to the US-South Korea relationship—having been navigated during demands for force flexibility to counterterrorism operations after 9/11. Korean experts are nervous at what they expect to be enormous pressure for flexible forces aimed at dealing with a China contingency. At the same time, Korean experts appeared resigned that eventual repositioning, meaning reduction, of US forces in northeast Asia is inevitable to deal with contingencies with China from well beyond the first island chain. The principal concern of Korean experts remains a strong military deterrent against a North Korean attack. Other issues Koreans debate regarding the alliance are possible post-INF missile deployments and responding to contingencies related to Taiwan.

Intricately linked with the main purpose of the US alliance from the perspective of South Korea, of course, is the ongoing challenge of managing North Korea. South Korea acknowledges that the Trump administration provided a window of opportunity for South Korea's engagement initiative. There is, however, a great deal of uncertainty

whether a re-elected President Trump would want to continue summit diplomacy or even lower-level diplomatic engagement with North Korea. Expectations among Korean experts are that a Biden administration will resume a more traditional approach towards North Korea. They cite Vice President Biden's April 2020 *Foreign Affairs* article in which he refers to a principled approach and enhanced diplomacy with North Korea in cooperation with China.⁴⁰ The general consensus among Korean experts is that a diplomatic approach, more or less active, will be pursued regardless of who is elected the next US president and that such an approach is preferable to a confrontational approach towards North Korea.

On the bilateral economic front, there was almost no mention of the United States-Korea Free Trade Agreement (KORUS) or the TPP. This constitutes something of good news in the sense that neither of these appear currently controversial in Korean views of bilateral issues with the United States. This was not the case more recently. South Korea was under intense pressure on KORUS during the first year of the Trump administration when adjustments to the agreement were negotiated in the face of public comments by the president critical of KORUS. Koreans also point out that they faced pressure from China not to join the TPP when the United States was characterizing it as a way to deal with China. The South Koreans also received US displeasure in agreeing to join the Beijing-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB).

At present, South Korea's greater worry is where and how South Korea fits into evolving US efforts to diversify supply chains away from China and how it can align with US objectives on pushing back on China's economic statecraft, especially China's legal and illegal efforts to acquire technology. Korean specialists noted that their country's industries are very concerned that they will be forced into a situation where they may be isolated or marginalized by a US economy decoupled from China; and be subject to harsh reprisals from China for any acquiescence to US demands for pushing back against China's economic statecraft and decoupling. There was a deep sense that Korea has benefitted economically from thirty years of dual-engagement

with both the United States and China, which has made Korea a top ten global economy, but that the outlook for such positive achievements is challenged. A key Korean judgment was that "the United States cannot simultaneously pursue a China containment policy and a broader economic decoupling and protectionist policy."

Increasingly strained Korea-Japan relations complicate US-Japan-South Korea trilateral coordination. Fundamental differences pervade Japan-South Korea relations—at least from the Korean perspective. The most immediate issue is Seoul's preference for reconciliation and summit diplomacy with North Korea and Tokyo's emphasis on maximum pressure. Korean specialists also perceive that Japan sees Seoul as too close to China. Finally, Korean specialists noted that there are Japanese who want to be much closer to Taiwan. Korea-Japan differences regarding North Korea, China and Taiwan will in turn complicate US-Korea alliance management, including trilateral relations among the United States, Korea, and Japan.

On a more positive note, Korean specialists see an opportunity to further engage with the United States in Southeast Asia. Korea's New Southbound Policy is a form of competition with China on regional infrastructure, development,

Korea has benefitted economically from 30 years of dual-engagement with both the US and China, but the outlook for such positive achievements is challenged

South Korea

and foreign direct investment. Koreans view the 2019 South Korea-US Fact Sheet on cooperation regarding ASEAN and especially the Mekong region as a new opportunity in bilateral relations.⁴¹

More broadly, despite respect for US innovation, values, and strengths, there are doubts about US leadership, credibility, capabilities, and commitment. Korean colleagues are incredulous that the US expects to prosecute the US-China hardening rivalry while simultaneously, relatively disengaging with the region commercially and diplomatically.

Southeast Asia



For most of Southeast Asia, the hardening rivalry between the United States and China frames their international relations, but does not dominate them. Bilateral relations with Washington are not being fundamentally altered by the intensified US-China rivalry; immediate priorities of COVID-19 response, economic recovery, and complex domestic political challenges have a critical bearing on relations with Washington as do long standing attitudes and issues in bilateral ties. There are clear strands of difference from the past in Southeast Asian thinking about the United States—ranging from a sense that this time US leadership and power are challenged in ways more serious than in earlier eras to doubts about US willingness rather than capacity to play a major role internationally and in the region. However, a major feature that emerged was the continuity of bilateral issues in relations with the United States.

Singapore

In Singapore, a small and comparatively wealthy state that publicly supports US military presence in the region, there are two core issues vis-à-vis Washington: international commercial stability and managing strategic alignment. Singapore is deeply concerned at Washington's retreat from the TPP, and its assertively reformist approach to trade issues globally. It views US hardening against China on the economic front, including decoupling, as complicating bilateral commercial

Southeast Asia

relations with both countries, and the resultant uncertainty regionally and globally as detrimental to Singapore's interests. Singapore shares, however, concerns with Washington about China's economic statecraft ranging from acquisition of high technology to Chinese students at Singapore universities working in frontier areas of technology and science with military applications. On the strategic front, Singapore has, since the early 1990s, regularly stepped up publicly to lock in US military presence in the city-state and across the region; and it did so again by renewing and enhancing key agreements for defense cooperation with the United States in 2019. Overall, there are no major disputes that hang over US-Singapore bilateral relations and there is a sense that differences regarding China can be managed on the strengths of a strong and carefully-managed bilateral economic and strategic relationship.

Thailand

Thailand's relations with Washington are dominated by dissonance in Thailand's domestic politics and the erosion of the country's democracy—including the 2014 coup. However, Thai elites are unwilling to dispense with the alliance, which they see as a necessary tool in foreign policy balancing, bargaining and management, and a source of direct benefits ranging from military hardware, training, and exercises. However, Thailand is already tilting toward China economically even as it retains an important place in US regional production and supply chains. Currently, Thailand is preoccupied by domestic politics, and US pressures on human rights and democracy are the key issue in bilateral relations. US-Thai bilateral relations are far more likely to be shaped by further developments on the democracy and human rights front than on differences about China.

Vietnam

As the United States and Vietnam mark a quarter century of renewed relations, the overall health of the relationship is robust. As they have for the past twenty-five years, human rights and democracy issues continue to constrain trust in some Hanoi government constituencies. The very success of US-Vietnam economic relations through expanded trade has now come to have complicating effects such as a large and



People await a mass rapid test for COVID-19 in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. Immediate priorities of COVID-19 response, economic recovery, and complex domestic political challenges have a critical bearing on Southeast Asian relations with Washington, more so than the US-China rivalry. Photo: Ulet Ifansasti/Getty Images

growing US trade deficit. The recent US decision to initiate investigations into Vietnam timber exports to the United States and valuation of the national currency are viewed as manageable differences given the mutual interest in enhanced security relations in the context of China's rise, aggressive behavior in the South China Sea, and growing US-China rivalry. In the case of US-Vietnam relations, the US-China dynamic is likely to enhance opportunities—even as persistent differences over human rights and democracy and new differences over trade and commerce create manageable complications.

Indonesia

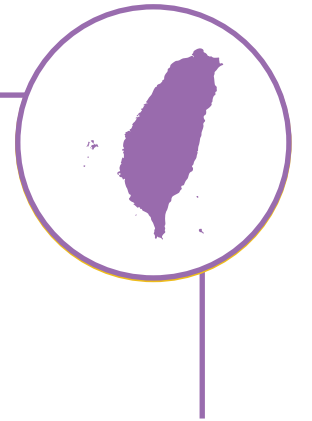
Relations between the United States and Indonesia in the last two decades have been framed by the so-called comprehensive strategic partnership. However, a take-off in commercial and security relations has yet to materialize. Jakarta seems to count on China as the more important economic partner even as it confronts its aggressiveness in the Natuna Sea in areas claimed by and that are part of Indonesia's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Given the heavy negative impact of COVID-19 in the country, Indonesia is focused on addressing the pandemic and economic recovery.

Southeast Asia

Internal management of this massive archipelago and its diverse populations also makes Indonesia comparatively inward focused.

Jakarta, along with other Southeast Asian governments, gives high priority to Chinese pledges to provide COVID-19 vaccinations and they view China's comparatively quick economic recovery and China's BRI as important contributors to economic revival. US standing has fallen particularly abruptly in Indonesia during the past few years. Historically, Indonesia's Muslim-majority population has been cautious about the United States, but the recent fall-off in support appears to reflect recent US decisions ranging from restricting Muslim immigration to formally accepting Jerusalem as the capital of Israel.

Taiwan



While expecting a continuation of strong US support militarily, diplomatically, and economically in a second Trump administration, Taiwan worries about possible weak follow through by a Biden administration on China initiatives with keen implications for Taiwan. They include opposition to Chinese expansion in the South China Sea and frequency of US freedom of navigation operations and shows of force countering Chinese challenges there and around Taiwan. Furthermore, Taiwan's representative in Washington is said to have recently taken the side in those favoring strategic clarity versus those favoring strategic ambiguity in the ongoing US debate on how firm the United States should be in declaring support for Taiwan if Taiwan were attacked by China. The Taiwan government was said to have found through private consultations that governments in India and Japan would favor more US clarity, while Australia was less supportive of such US clarity.

The Trump administration's partnering with Taiwan to work publicly together with other democracies in promoting pandemic countermeasures, safe and secure internet communications, and shared values of good governance were viewed very favorably in Taiwan. They added to Taiwan's international stature and importance, despite Taipei's lack of formal diplomatic relations with most countries. Many of these exchanges take place under

the rubric of the Trump government's Indo-Pacific strategy. Specialists observe that the Biden campaign has avoided expressing support for this strategy, a cause of serious concern in Taiwan.

Taiwan intends to continue working constructively with the United States in dealing with supply chain reorganization away from China. A worry is that the Biden camp is said to view negatively such supply chain reorganization and purported decoupling. A possible US implicit or explicit endorsement of continuing supply chains with China as the center is seen as an adverse development in Taiwan's acute competition with China.

Some in Taiwan focus on United States Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer's reported opposition to moving forward with a bilateral trade agreement with Taiwan because it would complicate implementation of the Phase One trade deal with China and follow on US economic negotiations with Beijing. They judge that a Biden administration might be more forthcoming than the Trump administration in moving forward on negotiating a bilateral trade deal with Taiwan which is strongly sought by the Taiwan government.

Specialists in Taiwan are proud of Taiwan's record in effectively handling the pandemic while fending off heavy pressures from China. Taiwan's democracy is seen as performing well with the presidency and legislature under the same party leadership. Civil society has been resilient and has taken a leading role in effectively fighting back against China's efforts to weaken social and political cohesion through malign influence operations. Polling data is said to show the growth of a Taiwan identity on the part of the vast majority of the island that is distinct from the China. And the data shows a large increase in what is said to be majority support in Taiwan to defend the country against aggression from the mainland. These trends are said to incline Taiwan to closer cooperation with the US in its competition with China.

Conclusion

On the eve of the 2020 US presidential elections, America's relations with Asia—with the exception of China—are not a significant campaign issue. This situation prevails against the backdrop of a hardened US policy towards China in the past two years and especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Whether and how the recent trajectory of rising competition between the United States and China will be sustained or altered remains uncertain even in the United States, and likely to be the subject of debate by whichever administration takes office in January 2021. The relative dominance of US-China relations in overall US-Asia relations also remains an open question; though there is little doubt that China will be the major driver of US approaches to the region.

In Asia, recent and prospective trends in US-China relations have raised numerous concerns and uncertainties among governments, publics, and specialists. Asian experts, too, express deep interest in "what is next for US-China relations." But regional experts, while mostly acknowledging the high priority accorded to the US-China relationship, do not regard US-China relations as the sum of US-Asia relations and are keen to manage their relations with the United States taking into account the China factor but also other bilateral interests. There is a consensus that this challenge has become more difficult in the wake of rising tensions in relations between Washington and Beijing. Asia experts also note that relationships among countries within the region and in some cases outside of it are becoming more important to their foreign relations. There was only modest reference to regional institutions and multilateral organizations, however.

Asia experts all state that their countries desire robust and constructive relationships with the United States. However, they share a consensus that the US is undergoing serious domestic challenges and that those challenges are likely to shape the US approach towards China, the Asia region and more broadly the world. Hence the outcome of the 2020 election will have a significant bearing on US policies towards China and Asia, but will only be important, and only one factor in what they anticipate to be a challenging and mixed picture for US relations with Asia.

Endnotes

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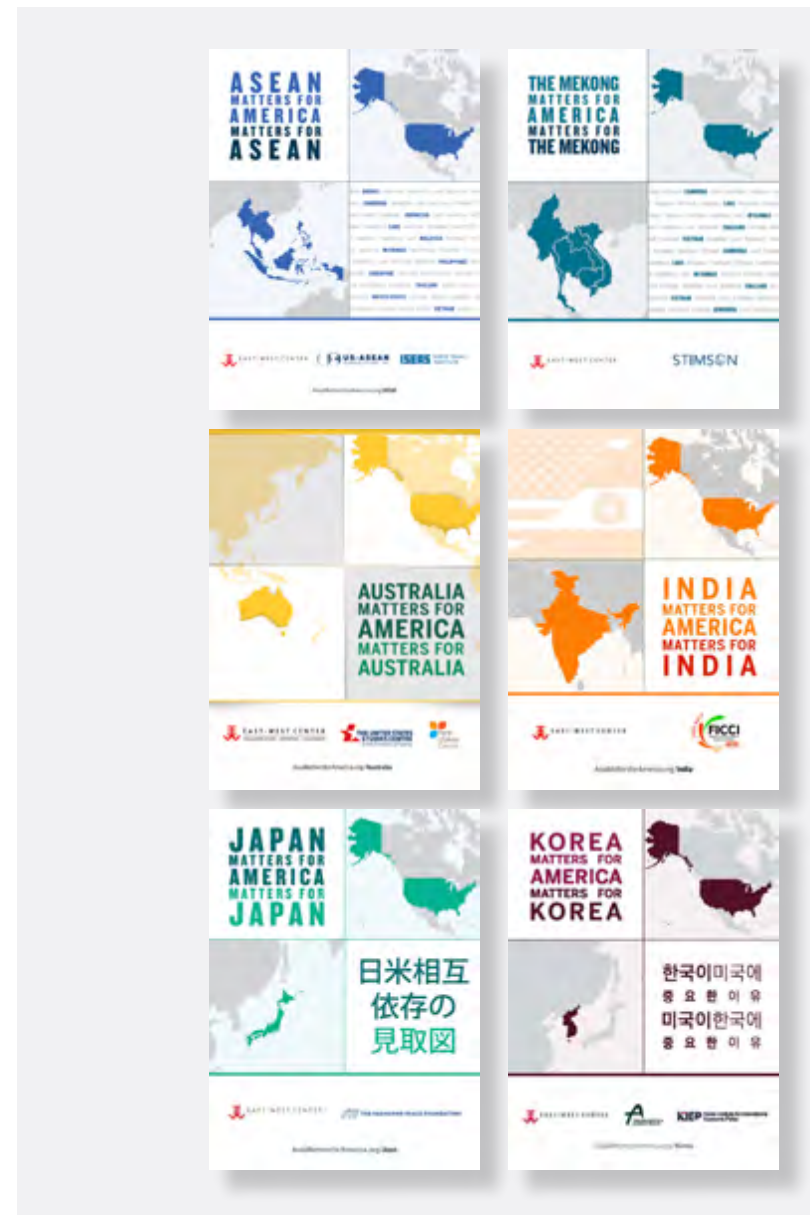
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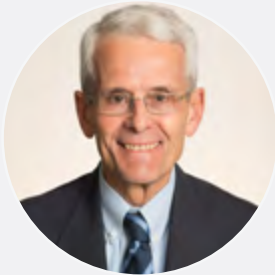


The *Asia Matters for America/America Matters for Asia* initiative is an interactive, online resource for credible and nonpartisan information, graphics, analysis, and news on US-Indo-Pacific relations at the national, state, and local levels developed by the East-West Center.

Key resources highlighted in this report include the [2020 Presidential Candidates on the Indo-Pacific tracker](#) and the [Trump Administration and US-Indo-Pacific Relations tracker](#), which highlight statements, developments, visits, and other interactions related to Asia by the 2020 presidential candidates and members of the Trump administration, respectively.



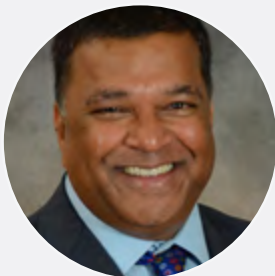
About the Authors



Robert Sutter is Professor of Practice of International Affairs at the Elliott School of The George Washington University (2011-). He also served as Director of the School's main undergraduate program involving over 2,000 students from 2013-2019. His earlier fulltime position was Visiting Professor of Asian Studies at Georgetown University (2001-2011).

A PhD graduate in History and East Asian Languages from Harvard University, Sutter has published 22 books (four with multiple editions), over 300 articles and several hundred government reports dealing with contemporary East Asian and Pacific countries and their relations with the United States. His most recent book is *Chinese Foreign Relations: Power and Policy of an Emerging Global Force Fifth Edition* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2021).

Sutter's government career (1968-2001) saw service as senior specialist and director of the Foreign Affairs and National Defense Division of the Congressional Research Service, the National Intelligence Officer for East Asia and the Pacific at the US Government's National Intelligence Council, the China division director at the Department of State's Bureau of Intelligence and Research and professional staff member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.



Satu Limaye is Vice President of the East-West Center (EWC), serving concurrently as Director of the East-West Center in Washington and the *Asia Matters for America* initiative. He is Founding Editor of the *Asia Pacific Bulletin*. He is also Senior Advisor at the Center for Naval Analyses (CNA) and Senior Fellow on Asia History and Policy at the Foreign Policy Institute at the Paul H. Nitze School of International Studies (SAIS). He is a graduate of Georgetown University and received his doctorate from Oxford University (Magdalen College) as a George C. Marshall Scholar.

He publishes and speaks widely on Asia-Pacific regional issues and supports various US government, foundation, fellowship and professional organizations. Current affiliations include the Korea Economic Institute (KEI) Advisory Council and The Asia Foundation Task Force on US-Southeast Asia Relations.

Recent publications include: "America's 'Pacific Principle' in an Indivisible Pacific Islands Region," (*Asia Pacific Bulletin*); "Despite Stumbles, America's Engagement with Southeast Runs Deep," (*Global Asia*); *Raging Waters: China, India, Bangladesh, and Brahmaputra Water Politics* (Marine Corps University Press); *Russia's Peripheral Relevance to US-Indo Pacific Relations* (Center for the National Interest); *Weighted West: The Indian Navy's New Maritime Strategy, Capabilities, and Diplomacy* (Center for Naval Analyses); and "ASEAN is Here to Stay and What that Means for the US" (*The Diplomat*).

Previously, Dr. Limaye served on the research staff of the Strategy, Forces & Resources Division at the Institute for Defense Analyses (IDA) and Director of Research & Publications at the Asia Pacific Center for Security Studies.

About the Institutions

The **Sigur Center for Asian Studies** is a university research institute and the academic home of the Asian Studies Program of the Elliott School of International Affairs at The George Washington University. Its mission is to increase the quality and broaden the scope of scholarly research and publication on Asia, promote US-Asian scholarly interaction and educate a new generation of students, scholars, analysts, and policymakers. The Sigur Center promotes research and policy analysis on East Asia, Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia and South Asia through an active program of publishing, teaching, public events and policy engagement. The Center offers students the largest Asian Studies program in the Washington, DC metropolitan region, with around 83 faculty members working on Asia. The Center was founded in 1991 out of the Sino-Soviet Institute. It was named for Gaston Sigur (1924-1995), a Japan specialist with a long career at The George Washington University, the National Security Council, and the US Department of State. It has enjoyed status as a signature program of the university since 2003.

The **East-West Center** promotes better relations and understanding among the people and nations of the United States, Asia, and the Pacific through cooperative study, research, and dialogue. Established by the US Congress in 1960, the Center serves as a resource for information and analysis on critical issues of common concern, bringing people together to exchange views, build expertise, and develop policy options.

The Center's 21-acre Honolulu campus, adjacent to the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, is located midway between Asia and the US mainland and features research, residential, and international conference facilities. The Center's Washington, DC office focuses on preparing the United States for an era of growing Asia Pacific prominence.

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East-West Center in Washington

1819 L St NW, Suite 600
Washington, DC 20036, USA
1.202.293.3995

EastWestCenter.org/Washington



A Hardening US-China Competition: Asia Policy in America's 2020 Elections and Regional Responses

ROBERT SUTTER and **SATU LIMAYE**

The US presidential election campaign debates focused by mid-2020 on the enormous and immediate domestic consequences of the worldwide novel coronavirus pandemic COVID-19 and economic crisis impacting the United States and concurrent widespread protests and counterarguments on police brutality and racial prejudice. President Donald Trump and his Democratic challenger, former Vice President Joseph Biden, were deeply divided on how the US government should respond to these domestic challenges.

Against this background, foreign policy was a secondary consideration with one notable exception—relations with China.

Robert Sutter is a Professor at The George Washington University and **Satu Limaye** is Vice President of the East-West Center and Director of the East-West Center in Washington.

