

Partisan Biases in U.S.-Japan Relations

By Paul Nadeau

Japan will welcome the Biden administration with relief in the wake of what was perceived as Trump's bombast, threats, and unpredictability – but it will be mixed with apprehension (fair or not) that Biden's presidency will follow the Obama administration's perceived weakness, or even accommodation, toward China. It's a crude simplification, but Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party's relationship with U.S. political parties is roughly that they share preferences but not perceptions with Democrats, and share perceptions but not preferences with Republicans. In practical terms, this means that Japanese decision makers favor alliances and multilateral approaches over unilateralism and brinkmanship, but are more suspicious of China's intentions and behavior than they believe Democrats to be. Put more indelicately, the LDP prefers working with Republicans rather than Democrats. This is combined with a traditional perception that Democrats undervalue Japan as a partner. Taken as a whole, this means that the incoming administration may have to do more to convince Japan that its priorities are being taken seriously – but will find in Japan an essential partner for advancing U.S. goals in the Indo-Pacific.

History shapes many Japanese decision-makers apprehensions of working with a Democratic administration. Bill Clinton's 1998 "fly-over" of Tokyo on his way to visit Beijing still stings more than twenty years later, while Obama's "strategic patience" with North Korea and failure to secure congressional ratification of TPP have also contributed to the idea that Democrats don't take Japan's priorities seriously. In 2016 many LDP backbenchers and even ministry officials privately expressed favor with what they hoped would be Donald Trump's harder line on China and (probably incorrectly) associated Hillary Clinton's approach to China with her husband's strategy of engagement.

There is also a certain (privately expressed) frustration among LDP figures with what they see as the Democratic Party's emphasis on values and normative concerns over practical concerns. For both the LDP and center-left Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan (roughly the successors of the Democratic Party of Japan which governed from 2009-2012), the emphasis is much more on pragmatism than values.

Japan's framing of the challenge posed by China is a good illustration. Japan's understanding of China is meaningfully different from that of the United States. While the United States' view of China has evolved from believing China can be a responsible stakeholder in the international system to viewing China as a strategic competitor, Japan's close historical, cultural, and geographic connections with China have led its decision makers to approach China on its own terms rather than as an abstraction. Japanese decision makers have long accepted that China's economy and military will outpace that of Japan's and do not see their countries in a strategic competition – but remain determined to resist Chinese pressure and not to back down against China's demands. China is seen to a large extent by many decision makers and much of the public as a "test of mettle," an opportunity for leaders to show backbone in the face of what they see as Chinese bullying.

Japan breaks with the United States, and the former Trump administration specifically, in terms of the ideological framing of the China threat. Certainly, there are many within the LDP (usually older members) who believe that China's Communist Party represents an ideological threat, but they are generally in the minority – though they rarely exert significant influence on the debate, they occasionally still see a bone

Paul Nadeau, cofounder and editor of Tokyo Review, explains that "History shapes many Japanese decision-makers apprehensions of working with a Democratic administration."

tossed their way by a ruling administration simply to show that they haven't been forgotten. Perhaps ironically for those unfamiliar with Japanese politics, it's the Japanese Communist Party, not the LDP, that has been most outspoken and forthright about the human rights challenges posed by Xi Jinping's regime, though as a minority opposition party they remain distant from the policy process and exert limited practical influence.

The more common view is that many Japanese people (like those anywhere else) remain intrigued by China's economic promise and vast market but are starkly wary, even more than they may admit, of China's military strength, grey zone incursions, and the risks of weaponized economic interdependence. Japan had borne the brunt of Chinese coercion – arrests of its citizens, anti-Japanese riots, and the rare earths embargo – for more than a decade before Chinese coercion of Australia intensified and grabbed attention throughout 2020.

China's growing assertiveness combined with perennial concerns in the region about U.S. staying power have been the key drivers of Japan's recent regional diplomacy. Abe Shinzo's administration had a notably proactive diplomacy and has taken on a leadership role in East Asia, but it may not be able to do so forever and certainly will not be able to replace the role of the United States in the region or act as a permanent stand-in. Japan has taken the lead on issues such as making progress on advancing economic liberalization, rulemaking on issues like digital trade, and more generally working to get like-minded democracies in the Indo-Pacific region on the same page on common interests. An important note of caution is that Japanese administrations may not always have the domestic political capital for such a leadership role – Abe Shinzo's premiership was long compared to his predecessors and he enjoyed an unusual period of political stability at home. If Abe's successors struggle with insecure political bases and diminished capital, as the administrations which immediately preceded him did, Japan may not have the domestic political stability to pursue the proactive diplomacy sought by Abe.

To that end, many Japanese decision makers are hoping that the change of administration will signal a renewed U.S. interest and presence in the region. The Biden administration is already off to a strong start, beyond simply being "not Trump." President Biden's call to Prime Minister Suga and mention of the Indo-Pacific region (a geopolitical concept long advanced by Tokyo), his stated commitment to work with allies, and the presence of experienced policy hands such as Anthony Blinken, Jake Sullivan, and Kurt Campbell are reassuring and Japanese officials have expressed as much both publicly and privately. It is also worth emphasizing that Xi Jinping's rule has helped evaporate hopes of engagement that might have been held during the Obama administration, with the consensus among both parties in Washington converging closer to that of Japan's LDP.

While a U.S. return to CPTPP might be unrealistic in the short- to medium-term, it would be worthwhile for the new administration to explore economic cooperation agreements with Japan that are as congruent with CPTPP rules as possible. This would be beneficial both for the economic gains of liberalized trade between the two nations and also for the signal it would send to Tokyo that the Biden administration is serious about economic engagement with Asia; it may even serve as a stepping-stone to future U.S. participation in CPTPP.

Less than a shopping list of policy initiatives (though there are plenty), the emphasis in Washington should be on appreciating Japan's priorities in the Indo-Pacific and coordinating on common goals. Even if history has made Democrats and the LDP apprehensive of each other, there should be enough pragmatism on both sides to overcome difficult memories and recognize that their interests align far more and often than not.

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