The Pandemic as a Geopolitical Game Changer in the Indo-Pacific: The View from Japan

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The coronavirus pandemic that struck in late 2019 has affected the world profoundly, and Japan is no exception. But the direct impact on Japan has been relatively small considering the number of cases of infections and deaths relative to the size of Japan's population, particularly considering its elderly population and high density. For instance, among the G7 countries, Japan has had the fewest cases of infections (4,690 per million population as of May 2, 2021) compared to 32,276 in Canada, 40,620 in Germany, 64,804 in the United Kingdom, 66,828 in Italy, 86,283 in France, and 99,652 in the United States. Similarly, among the G7 countries, Japan has had by far the fewest number of deaths (81 per million population as of May 2, 2021) compared to 638 in Canada, 996 in Germany, 1,601 in France, 1,776 in the United States, 1,870 in the United Kingdom, and 2,004 in Italy.[1]

This chapter argues that although the direct disruptions to Japan resulting from the pandemic have been less than to the other G7 countries, the effect of the pandemic on other nations with strong geopolitical importance to Japan—in particular, the United States and China—coupled with changes in Japan's domestic political and economic environment have accelerated changes in geopolitical posture and direction that were already in progress in Japan. The fundamental geopolitical challenge facing Japan is how to ensure its military security, political independence, and economic prosperity in the face of a less reliable and less predictable United States and a more powerful and more assertive China. For Japan, the ideal resolution of this challenge is to maintain positive and constructive relations with both countries, while recognizing the reality that even as economic ties with China—whether in trade, investment, finance, tourism, or the exchange of people—are growing relative to ties with the United States, political and security ties (and the sharing of common values) with the United States remain the centerpiece of Japan's foreign policy.

Given this context, it is only natural that Japan would seek to diversify and strengthen its relationships with other countries, regions, economic arrangements, and international organizations and institutions. This diversification, which could be seen since the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s, has gained momentum in recent years, and the pandemic has served only to accelerate it. The analysis proceeds through the examination of the following: 1) pandemic chronology; 2) Japan's domestic politics; 3) relations with the United States; 4) relations with China; 5) Japan's diversification strategy; and 6) conclusions.

Pandemic Chronology

To set the context of Japan's geopolitical stance in response to the pandemic, it is first necessary to understand how the pandemic has developed in Japan. The government confirmed the country's first case of the COVID-19 pandemic on January 16, 2020, in a resident who had returned from Wuhan, China. However, for most of February, attention was focused on the Diamond Princess cruise liner, which had been docked at Yokohama port since February 3. By the time all 3,711 people on the ship had disembarked on March 1, it was found that 712 (19.2 percent) had been infected by COVID-19, and 14 of them had died.[2]

Japan received worldwide criticism for its handling of the infections on the Diamond Princess. Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the U.S. National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, said: "So, the [Japanese] quarantine process failed. I mean, I'd like to sugarcoat it and try to be diplomatic about it, but it failed. I mean, there were people getting infected

on that ship. So something went awry."[3] This assessment was echoed by many public health experts both in Japan and abroad. The lessons learned from the Diamond Princess experience and the scrutiny and criticism that resulted were among the factors that compelled Japanese authorities by March to take stronger measures to contain the spread of the virus in the country. However, several factors led to a delay in taking decisive action, including conducting aggressive and systematic testing for the virus.

First, some Japanese leaders in February and March feared that if Japan showed a large number of infected cases, this could lead to the 2020 Summer Olympics, scheduled for July and August, to be postponed or canceled. They saw the Olympics as important not only as a vehicle to assert Japan's presence on the world stage — as was done in 1964 — but as a catalyst to stimulate demand, investment, tourism, and innovation in a sluggish economy. In addition, taking credit for a successful Olympics was seen by many as key for Prime Minister Abe Shinzo to enhance his historical legacy, to shape the political agenda (including a possible election) for the final year of his third three-year term as president of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party, and to influence the choice of his successor as prime minister.[4]

Second, public health authorities worried that if testing for the coronavirus uncovered a large number of infections, patients could overwhelm the medical system and lead to the scarce amount of resources being devoted to those with mild symptoms to the detriment of those with severe symptoms who required intensive care. This fear of a "collapse" of the medical system's ability to cope with a large infected patient population led to the conscious and explicit policy to limit the number of tests conducted for the coronavirus.[5]

Third, during the early stages in January and February, the number of infected cases in Japan was small enough so that by identifying "clusters," contact tracing could be fairly effective in tracking down those who had been infected. By April, however, it became clear that there were too many cases to permit accurate tracing of more than a small fraction of the infected cases.

Fourth, Japan lacked a sense of urgency in the spring of 2020 in part because its number of confirmed infected cases per million (119)—compared to Spain (5,359), the U.S. (3,675), Italy (3,505), France (2,596) and Germany (1,985)—and the number of deaths per million (four) were far fewer than in most other countries. However, the number of infected cases in Japan was not really comparable to that of other countries because the number of tests conducted per million in Japan (1,459) was minuscule compared to other countries—Spain (41,332), Italy (36,244), New Zealand (32,335), Germany (30,400), Australia (26,069), the U.S. (22,729), Hong Kong (20,674), and South Korea (12,488). According to the OECD, Japan's use of the PCR test ranked 35th out of 36 OECD member countries. The policy to pursue minimal testing fostered a sense of complacency in Japan and a serious underestimation of the spread of the virus.[6]

On March 24, the government and the International Olympic Committee agreed to postpone the Summer Games. This paved the way for the government on April 7 finally to announce a one-month state of emergency from April 8 to May 6 for Tokyo and six other prefectures. On April 14, this was expanded to the entire country, although the "lockdowns" were partial in nature and largely exhortatory, lacking the power of legal enforcement and penalties for infractions.[7]

By avoiding the "3Cs"—closed spaces, crowded places, and close contact—the cases of infection appeared to be under control, with the number of new COVID-19 cases falling from 600-700 a day in mid-April to about 20-30 a day by mid-May. This led Abe to lift the state of emergency on May 25. At the press conference in which he made the announcement, Abe said, "In a characteristically Japanese way, we have all but brought this epidemic under control in the last month and a half...Surely, it shows the power of the Japan model."[8] No one has clearly defined what the "Japan model" is, although avoiding the "3Cs," wearing facemasks, washing hands, bowing rather than shaking hands, contact-tracing, and perhaps immunity resulting from past exposure to similar viruses or from BCG vaccinations against tuberculosis, have been cited as potential reasons for Japan's relative success.

However, by July 29, the daily number of new infections in Japan totaled 1,000 for the first time.[9] And by November 21, the new daily cases had reached 2,596 nationwide and 539 in Tokyo.[10] The accumulated infected cases reached 100,000 on October 29, 200,000 on December 22, 300,000 on January 14, and 400,000 on February 6.[11] Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide, who had succeeded Abe in early September, was forced to announce a state of emergency on January 7, and to extend it twice, until March 21.[12] And on April 23, Suga announced a third state of emergency, only three months before the Olympics scheduled to be held in July.[13] The "Japan model," which had appeared to be successful in controlling COVID-19 in the spring and early summer of last year, had clearly shown its limits by the late summer and early fall of last year, and Japan's delay in obtaining anti-coronavirus vaccines and implementing vaccinations meant that controlling the pandemic could not be expected soon.

Japan's Domestic Politics

Although COVID-19 infections and deaths in Japan were much fewer than in the other G-7 countries, Japan's political leadership did not gain high marks from the public. In fact, support for Abe declined steadily during the spring and summer of 2020. In mid-May, for instance, an *Asahi Shimbun* poll showed that support for Abe had fallen to a record low of 29 percent, and 57 percent of the public disapproved of his handling of COVID-19 versus only 30 percent who approved.[14] A *Mainichi Shimbun* poll released on May 23 found that Abe's approval rating plunged 13 points to 27 percent from May 6, when the poll was last taken, and that the disapproval rating jumped from 45 percent to 64 percent.[15]

This gap between positive pandemic results and weak public support for the political leadership is the result of multiple factors. First, many of the steps taken to control the virus were done in a haphazard, uncoordinated way that failed to give the public confidence that the government was fully in control of the situation. Second, the LDP plan to hand out 300,000 yen cash disbursements to qualified households was abruptly changed, after the Komeito intervened, to 100,000 yen per person without income restrictions, revealing a lack of policy coordination. Third, the political leadership did not convey the sense of urgency displayed by many specialists in the public health, epidemiology, and medical community, and many of the actions taken were criticized as being too little, too late. Fourth, individual politicians were found to be violating their own instructions to the public to avoid the "3Cs" when it came to wining, dining, and socializing in close quarters and until late in the evening.

Fifth, the past year and a half have also seen a string of resignations, and in some cases arrests, of LDP politicians, including cabinet ministers. In October 2019, Sugawara Isshu, Minister of Economy, Trade and Industry, was forced to resign over a financial scandal.[16] In December 2019, LDP Diet member Akimoto Tsukasa was arrested in a casino-related bribery scandal, and five other politicians were suspected of similar infractions.[17] In June 2020, Minister of Justice Kawai Katsuyuki, a close confidant of Abe, was arrested for allegedly buying votes, as was his wife, Upper House Diet member Kawai Anri.[18]

Finally, there were lingering aftermaths of previous scandals including the Moritomo Gakuen affair[19] and the Kake Gakuen affair,[20] as well as new scandals including Abe's attempt to revise a government retirement law to make it possible to promote Kurokawa Hiromu, head of the Tokyo High Public Prosecutor's Office, to prosecutor-general. Kurokawa, who was seen to be partial to Abe, eventually resigned because he was found to have violated government ethics rules.[21] Perhaps most damaging to Abe was the annual "Cherry Blossom Viewing Party," to which Abe was accused of inviting his friends and constituents to reward them by using funds that allegedly exceeded the limits allowed by law.[22] Before the investigation of this issue concluded, Abe, on August 28, 2020, suddenly announced his resignation as prime minister, citing health reasons.[23]

Abe's resignation as the longest-serving prime minister in Japanese history brought to the close an unusually active seven years and eight months of Japanese diplomacy. In addition to visiting a record number of countries, Abe had led the effort to increase the defense budget, to revise and expand the national security strategy, to create a National Security Council in the Prime Minister's Office, to enact the State Secrets Protection Law, to revise and strengthen the Security Law, to expand the U.S.-Japan Security Guidelines, to conclude and implement the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) (despite the withdrawal of the United States from its predecessor, the TPP), to conclude and implement the EU-Japan Economic Partnership Agreement, to visit Pearl Harbor, and to pursue active diplomacy with U.S. presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump as well as Russian President Vladimir Putin, Chinese Chairman Xi Jinping, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, and many others.

When Suga succeeded Abe as prime minister on September 18, 2020, some foreign policy experts in Japan and abroad expressed concern because of Suga's limited knowledge of and experience in foreign affairs. Unlike Abe, he had never lived or studied abroad, spoke no foreign languages, lacked the charisma and public speaking skills often expected of a world statesman, and had built his political career as a shrewd, pragmatic, hardnosed insider with a wide domestic network and reputation for ruthless effectiveness in getting things done. However, Suga's supporters pointed out that precisely because of his pragmatism and the fact that he had served as Abe's trusted chief cabinet secretary for the entire time Abe was prime minister, Suga was intimately familiar with the relevant people, issues, and policies and that continuity of Abe's diplomacy could be assured.[24]

Suga started his prime ministership with approval ratings above 70 percent, but he stumbled early on by rejecting the nomination of six Japanese scholars to membership in the Japan Science Council, ostensibly because they had taken positions on issues of national defense contrary to the LDP's positions. His actions were widely criticized as an attempt to suppress academic freedom.[25] In December, Yoshikawa Takamori, an LDP Diet

member and former minister of agriculture, resigned over a financial scandal.[26] By January 2021, Suga's approval rating had dropped to 33 percent.[27] Meanwhile, cases of COVID-19 were beginning to increase again, and Suga was seen to lack a sense of urgency and to be making statements and taking actions that were too little too late.

A major issue that contributed to criticism of Suga was the government's "Go to Travel" subsidy program to revive the domestic tourism industry battered by the coronavirus. This program was launched on July 22 by Abe but excluded Tokyo out of concern that promoting tourism to and from such densely populated urban centers as Tokyo could lead to significantly increasing the number of COVID-19 infections. On October 1, two weeks after Suga assumed the prime ministership, Tokyo was added to the "Go to Travel" program, against the advice of public health experts. On October 29, the cases of infection topped 100,000, but it was not until December 14 that Suga announced a halt of the "Go to Travel" program during the New Year holidays.[28] Although reviving the travel and tourism industry was seen as an important way to boost the economy, many suspected that the real reason this industry received such favorable treatment by the government is that the leading politician supported by the industry is LDP Secretary-General Nikai Toshihiro, the kingmaker who in September made it possible for Suga to succeed Abe as prime minister.[29]

Another factor that has weakened support for Suga is the scandal involving the wining and dining of senior government officials by company representatives, including by Suga Seigo, the prime minister's eldest son. On February 24, the communications ministry reprimanded 11 officials for violating the National Public Service Ethics Law after they were treated to expensive meals by officials of a broadcasting company, including Suga Seigo. There were 39 such occasions between July 2016 and December 2020, and Suga's son reportedly attended 21 of them, with the company paying over 600,000 yen.[30]

The handling of the coronavirus and the political scandals described above have drawn much of the nation's political and media attention to domestic affairs and have contributed to the decline in Suga's support. According to an NHK poll released on March 8, the approval rating for the Suga Cabinet was 40 percent and disapproval was 37 percent, the first time in the three months since December 2020 for support to surpass nonsupport for the Suga Cabinet.[31] These uncertainties, including the fate of the Tokyo Olympics, led some to speculate that perhaps Suga would not be able to exercise the leadership required to stay in power beyond his first year in office. In the meantime, from October 18 to 21, Suga took his first overseas trip as prime minister and visited Vietnam and Indonesia.

Relations with the United States

Newly installed Japanese prime ministers in the postwar period have often gone to the United States on their first overseas visit, signifying the importance of the bilateral relationship. However, Suga was installed as prime minister in the midst of the U.S. election campaign between Trump and former vice-president Joe Biden. The election and the pandemic both prevented an early in-person meeting between the two heads of state.

Australian prime minister Scott Morrison was the first head of state to speak on the telephone with Suga after his installation, but on September 20, Suga and Trump had a 25-minute phone call in which they confirmed that the bilateral alliance was "the

cornerstone of peace and stability in the region." They discussed, among other issues, the COVID-19 pandemic, North Korean missiles, the return to Japan of Japanese nationals who have been abducted by North Korea, and the importance of pursuing their shared vision of a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific."[32]

Japan's relations with the United States since the advent of the Trump administration in January 2017 were at times uncertain. However, from the standpoint of the Abe government, relations turned out to be much better for Japan than had been feared during the presidential campaign of 2016, when candidate Trump made statements that, if acted on, could have led to fundamental changes in the bilateral relationship.[33] In particular, many in Japan feared that Trump would try to slash the bilateral trade imbalance by forcing Japan to buy American products or by imposing tariffs on Japanese products, including automobiles, being exported to the United States. Although Trump withdrew the United States from the TPP and imposed tariffs on steel and aluminum imports, these actions were not the harsh trade policies that some had feared. Trump did initiate trade negotiations to regain from Japan what had been lost by withdrawing from the TPP—especially in agricultural tariff reductions—but these were no more demanding than what Japan had conceded in the TPP.[34] A significant number of arms purchases by Japan, as well as assiduous efforts by Abe to stroke Trump's ego, seemed to keep Trump at bay.

On the security side, Trump assured Abe in their first formal meeting in February 2017 that there would be continuity, including U.S. assurances that the Senkaku Islands would be covered under Article 5 of the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty—just as Obama had pledged publicly when he visited Japan on a state visit in 2014.[35] In 2019, then-National Security Adviser John Bolton disclosed that the Trump administration was seeking a four-fold increase in Japan's host nation support for the stationing of U.S. military forces in Japan.[36] If Trump had been re-elected for a second term, this would have become a highly contentious bilateral issue.

Japan's view of the Trump administration was clearly divided between the general public, which did not want to see Trump serve a second term, and the political leadership, which had established what it believed to be a positive working relationship based on good personal chemistry between Abe and Trump. The public's perception can be seen in the results of public opinion polls: 1) a poll conducted by Gallup and the *Yomiuri Shimbun* in November 2019 found that 76 percent of Japanese thought that "it would not be desirable for President Donald Trump to be re-elected in 2020";[37] 2) a *Nikkei* poll conducted in January 2020 found that 72 percent of Japanese would not like to see Trump re-elected, while only 18 percent said they would;[38] and 3) an NHK poll conducted in February and March 2020 found that 57 percent of Japanese agreed that, "Re-electing Trump would have a more negative than positive impact on Japan" (only 10.3 percent answered that it would be more positive than negative).[39]

By contrast, the Japanese leadership—LDP, many government bureaucrats, and the business community—viewed Trump as more aligned with Japan's foreign policy interests than any of the more than 20 Democratic candidates running for the presidency. The Democrats were seen to fall into three camps: 1) candidates who were totally unknown by, and unfamiliar with, Japan, and therefore unpredictable and requiring strenuous Japanese efforts to build relationships with them from scratch; 2) progressives, such as Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth

Warren, who were seen as protectionists and isolationists; and 3) former vice president Joe Biden, the one candidate familiar to Japan's policymakers, but someone seen to portend a continuation of the Obama administration—in the Japanese view, too soft on China, North Korea, and South Korea, too tough on Russia, and too wedded to human rights.

Although Trump did not appear to be making material progress in his meetings with North Korean Chairman Kim Jong-un, Abe was pleased about the meetings in certain respects. First, they had resulted in fewer displays by Pyongyang of overt belligerence in the form of nuclear testing and missile launchings—in contrast to the passive "strategic patience" policy of the Obama administration. Also, Trump gave repeated assurances that, in response to Abe's request, he had brought up the issue of Japanese abductees each time he met with Kim, an important factor for Abe to boost his domestic political support. On South Korea, Abe did not appreciate Obama's efforts to "meddle" in Tokyo's contentious relationship with Seoul, now worsened because the Moon Jae-in government appeared to abrogate the agreement on "comfort women" that had been reached between the Park and Abe governments in December 2015. It was not until the Moon government threatened in August 2019 to terminate the GSOMIA (General Security of Military Information Agreement) with Japan that the Trump administration intervened to get Moon to relent, which was just fine for Japan.[40] And on Russia, Abe appreciated Trump's giving him a free hand to discuss with Putin the return of the Northern Territories to Japan and the concluding of a peace treaty. Obama, on the other hand, had repeatedly warned Abe not to get too friendly with Putin, which Japan viewed as an unwanted constraint.

But the most important factor that led Japan's leadership to favor Trump was his stance on China. In Japan's view, the Obama administration, from start to finish, was too idealistic, too docile, and too accommodating in its dealings with China. The fear was that Obama would be lulled by Xi Jinping into some form of G-2, a "new model of great power relations" that would sideline Japan. By contrast, Trump was seen in Japan as pragmatic, realistic, and results-oriented in trying to change Chinese behavior. Some in Japan feared that if Trump pressed too hard on China and started a new Cold War, this would be detrimental to Japan because it could be forced to choose between the two. Nonetheless, from Japan's standpoint, a certain level of tension between the United States and China was welcomed because it would heighten Japan's value to both countries. Indeed, the thawing of Sino-Japanese relations in 2018-2019 was seen in Japan as thanks to Trump's confrontational stance toward China which, in this view, forced Xi to wake up to realize Japan's value to China as an economic partner.

The Japanese leadership's preference for Trump was made explicit in a widely-read article published in the April 2020 issue of *The American Interest* titled "The Virtues of a Confrontational China Strategy."[41] The article, written by an unidentified "official of the Japanese government," asserted: "Trump's unpredictable and transactional approach is a lesser evil compared to the danger of the United States going back to cajoling China to be a 'responsible stakeholder.'" The timing of the article made it clear that the official was arguing that, from the standpoint of Japan's national interest, the re-election of Trump would be preferable to a Democrat winning the presidency.[42]

Despite this preference for Trump, the Japanese leadership—as pragmatic and as resilient as ever—quickly adjusted to the victory of Joe Biden as president in November 2020. As one Japanese diplomat was fond of saying, "The American presidential election is like a Christmas present. When we're asked what we want, we reply, 'It's up to you.' When we open the gift box, regardless of what's inside, we smile with delight and say, "This is *exactly* what I wanted!"[43] Since so many of the national security officials of the Biden administration are people who worked in the Obama administration, the Japanese have had a relatively easy time re-establishing the personal relationships that had been forged with them during the Obama years. This includes the replacement in January 2021 of Ambassador Sugiyama Shinsuke—who had formed close ties to the Trump team since his arrival in Washington, D.C. in March 2018—by Ambassador Tomita Koji, who had served during the Obama years as deputy chief of mission in the Japanese Embassy in Washington, D.C. as well as director general for North American affairs.

On February 18, less than a month after the inauguration, Secretary of State Tony Blinken met virtually with his foreign minister counterparts in Australia, India, and Japan—the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the Quad), formed in the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami and formalized in 2007. Among the topics discussed were counterterrorism, countering disinformation, maritime security, and "the urgent need to restore the democratically elected government in Burma." They also addressed "the priority of strengthening democratic resilience in the broader region." The four reiterated a commitment for the Quad to meet at least annually at ministerial levels and regularly at senior and working levels "to strengthen cooperation on advancing a free and open Indo-Pacific region, including support for freedom of navigation and territorial integrity."[44]

On March 12, Biden, Suga, Morrison, and Prime Minister Narendra Modi met virtually for the first-ever heads of state meeting of the Quad. Among the issues discussed were the pandemic, economic cooperation, climate change, resilient supply chains, maritime security, and emerging and critical technologies. Although China is not explicitly mentioned in any of the announcements related to this meeting, it can be inferred from the topics on the agenda that China was a major subject of discussion. For instance, the Quad's plans for the joint distribution of coronavirus vaccines across the Indo-Pacific region was aimed to counter Beijing's vaccine diplomacy.[45] China, for its part, criticized the Quad as an attempt by the United States to create an Asian version of NATO, aimed to undermine China's legitimate rise.

The following week, Blinken and Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin flew to Japan and South Korea on the first overseas visit by any cabinet official since the inauguration.[46] In Tokyo, they held a meeting of the U.S.-Japan Security Consultative Committee ("Two-Plus-Two") between Blinken and Japanese Foreign Minister Motegi Toshimitsu and Austin and Japanese Minister of Defense Kishi Nobuo, covering U.S.-Japan coordination on China policy.[47] Blinken then flew to Anchorage and was joined by National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan to meet March 18-19 with Chinese Communist Party Foreign Affairs Chief Yang Jiechi and State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi.[48]

In contrast to the haphazard, disorganized, shoot-from-the-hip approach of the Trump administration, the Biden team was impressive in its disciplined and professional orchestration of coordinating with its allies before meeting with Chinese officials, and following this up with the meeting with Biden and Suga in Washington, D.C. on April 16.

Relations with China

North Korea's nuclear and missile developments are issues of immediate concern for Japan, but the biggest long-term foreign policy challenge for Japan is China. Since establishing diplomatic relations in 1973, Sino-Japanese relations have had their ups and downs. But the growth of China's economy relative to Japan's is nothing short of remarkable. In 1980, China's GDP of $305 billion was about one-third of Japan's GDP of $1.1 trillion. In 2010, China ($6.1 trillion) overtook Japan ($5.7 trillion) to become the world's second-largest economy, and China surpassed the United States as Japan's most important trading partner. The IMF predicts that by 2023, China's GDP will grow to three times Japan's GDP.[49]

Despite the attempt by both sides to derive benefits from the growing economic ties and to keep politics and the economy separate, in reality, both sides realize that this is easier said than done. In 2005, anti-Japanese sentiment in China led to protests and disruptions in trade, but these were short-lived.[50] However, the 2010 collision between a Chinese ship and a Japanese ship led to China retaliating by restricting the export of rare earth metals to Japan.[51] This economic retaliation has been repeated against South Korea over the announcement in 2016 that the United States would deploy the THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense) in South Korea.[52] More recently China imposed economic sanctions against Australia and in November 2020 issued a list of "14 demands" aimed at the Australian government.[53]

In September 2012, as a result of the Japanese government purchasing the Senkaku (or Diaoyu) Islands in the East China Sea, violent protests against Japanese companies broke out in dozens of Chinese cities, including facilities operated by Toyota, Honda, Panasonic, and others, being set on fire.[54] The constant Chinese maritime patrolling of the Senkaku Islands and Japanese attempts to counter these activities have created a tense situation that could result in open conflict. And on February 1, China enacted a law that gives Chinese Coast Guard crew members the right to use weapons if needed against foreign ships that ignore their instructions.[55]

The rapid military buildup by China and its activities in the South China and East China seas have increased Japan's strategic concerns. China announced on March 5 its 2021 defense budget, which includes a 6.8 percent increase over the previous year. At $208 billion, it is one-quarter of that of the United States, but four times larger than Japan's defense spending.[56] The U.S. Navy expects China's navy, already numerically the largest in the world, to increase from the 360 battle force ships it had at the end of 2020 to 420 in 2030, while the United States will grow from 297 to 355 by 2034. China may launch its third aircraft carrier this year, following the Liaoning, which it purchased second-hand from Ukraine and refurbished, and the Shandong, its first domestically-built carrier. With three carriers, it can simultaneously have one in operation, one in repair, and one in training, which is the ideal combination.[57]

On March 4, Admiral Philip Davidson, head of U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, stated, "The period between now and 2026, this decade, is the time horizon in which China is positioned to achieve overmatch in its capability, and when Beijing could, 'could,' widely choose to forcibly change the status quo in the region...And I would say the change in that status quo could be permanent."[58] He was referring to the possibility of China taking action against Taiwan. In his March 9 testimony in front of the Senate, Davidson suggested that America's decades-long position of strategic ambiguity toward Taiwan should be reassessed.[59]

Although the Japanese leadership had expressed concern before the U.S. election that the Biden administration may be too soft on China, early statements by Biden and his foreign policy team have provided a certain level of assurance. Blinken cited the U.S. relationship with Beijing as "the biggest geopolitical test of the 21st century," noting a need to engage China from a position of strength which can only be done alongside allies and partners." Speaking about the administration's national security strategy, Blinken said, "China is the only country with the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to seriously challenge the stable and open international system—all the rules, values, and relationships that make the world work the way we want it to."[60]

On the military portion of the Quad, cooperation has been increasing over the past year through bilateral agreements between Quad partners and joint military drills. Last November, Australia joined the annual Malabar exercises with the United States, Japan, and India. Conducted annually since 1992, the maneuvers have grown in size and complexity in recent years to address what the U.S. Navy has described in the past as a "variety of shared threats to maritime security in the Indo-Asia Pacific." The participation of Australia meant that all four members of the Quad were involved in the drills for the first time since 2007.[61]

All four have had issues with China in recent years. In the case of India, in June 2020, Indian and Chinese troops were involved in a military clash along the Line of Actual Control (the de facto border in the Himalayas), leaving troops dead on both sides after hand-to-hand combat. Relations have been chilly since, with the emergence of both trade and technology disputes.[62]

Japan's Diversification Strategy

In public opinion polls over the past two decades asking which country in the world is the most liked, admired, or respected, Japan usually appears in the top five.[63] This is in part because, unlike the 1970s to 1990s, Japan is no longer feared as an economic juggernaut intent on conquering the world, its Constitution has prevented it from launching wars, its overseas assistance has aided many countries especially in Asia and Africa, and its popular culture—manga, anime, J-pop, food, etc.—has proved to be popular overseas. At the same time, its neighborhood is not entirely friendly. Public opinion polls and media reports generally reveal that the least favorable views of Japan are in China, North Korea, South Korea, and Russia.[64]

As a result of Japan's defeat in World War Two, the Allied Occupation, the San Francisco Peace Treaty, the Cold War, and the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty, Japan's postwar diplomacy has had as its foundation close ties to the United States. However, the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s led to a multipolar world, and information technology has contributed to the world becoming more diversified and fragmented. In addition, the United States over the past few years has become less united, more divided, and seemingly less committed to engaging with the world as it had been doing during the Cold War. In September 2013,[65] Obama declared that "the United States is not the world's policeman," while his failure to act in August 2013 on the "red line" he had drawn for Syria in August 2012 was noted around the world, including Japan, where many viewed it as casting doubt on America's willingness or ability to stand by its commitments.[66] The end of the Cold War, and subsequent developments, have prompted some in Japan to argue that the country should depend less on the United States and diversify its foreign relations—to which Abe contributed.

The 2016 election of Donald Trump as president signaled to the world, including Japan, that American voters had profound dissatisfactions and anxieties—whether about economic security, unemployment, social inequalities, immigration, race, etc.—and that they demanded "change" to benefit Americans. Trump turned out to be a xenophobe who claimed that the world, especially our allies and partners, were "ripping off" the United States and that "from now on, it's going to be America First!"[67]

This solipsistic view of the world, coupled with Trump's erratic behavior, led many Japanese to question the reliability, dependability, and stability of the United States as a partner and ally. In addition, the competence and the policy effectiveness of the American government were severely damaged as the Trump administration mishandled the coronavirus pandemic. Public opinion polls in late 2020 showed the United States as having had the worst response to the pandemic among the G7 countries, with the greatest number of infected cases and the largest number of deaths.[68] The pandemic accelerated the path toward diversification that Japan had already been pursuing since the end of the Cold War.

When Suga assumed the prime ministership, he realized that the U.S. presidential election and the pandemic would prevent him from visiting the United States for the time being. And given Japan's delicate relationships with China, Russia, and South Korea, these would not be easy destinations for his first overseas trip as prime minister. The natural choice was Southeast Asia, following the footsteps of Abe, who made Vietnam his first overseas trip after resuming the prime ministership in December 2012. During his first year in office, Abe visited all 10 members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Suga's four-day trip to Vietnam and Indonesia included discussions to promote tourism, business travel, and investment, especially in infrastructure, and to diversify supply chains.[69] In Indonesia, Suga pledged that Japan would provide 50 billion yen in loans for disaster prevention and to fight COVID-19.[70]

Particularly noteworthy were agreements regarding national security. Suga and Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc agreed to transfer defense technology and equipment to Vietnam, following an agreement in July 2020 with the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) according to which Hanoi will borrow 36.63 billion yen to build six coast guard patrol vessels, to be delivered by October 2025. In Jakarta, Suga and President Joko Widodo pledged to strengthen security and defense ties. Building on a 2015 agreement to

enhance security cooperation in the South China Sea, they said they would hold a meeting of foreign and defense ministers at an early date and expedite talks on the sale of defense-related equipment and technology.[71]

Without explicitly naming China, Suga's statements throughout his visits to Vietnam and Indonesia had China in the background. He denounced moves "that go against the rule of law" in the South China Sea while emphasizing that "ASEAN and Japan fully share fundamental principles." With Phuc, Suga agreed to cooperate on the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Initiative.[72] The 10 countries of ASEAN, for their part, have developed the "ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific," accepting the idea of an Indo-Pacific region but carefully avoiding endorsing a particular strategy.[73] Nonetheless, Suga stated that he "strongly supports" a document that "powerfully sets forth the rule of law, openness, freedom, transparency, and inclusiveness as ASEAN's principles for behavior."[74] Suga further denied that the Quad, which had met in Tokyo earlier in October, had any intention of becoming an Asian version of NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization). Rather, Japan and its partners "are willing to cooperate with any country that shares our thinking."[75]

ASEAN's reluctance to offend or alienate China is understandable, given that in the 10 years between 2009 and 2019, China's share of ASEAN total trade has grown from 11.6 percent to 18 percent, and the share is almost certain to grow.[76] Bilihari Kausikan, the astute former senior official of the Singapore Ministry of Foreign Affairs, recently wrote:

> China's size and economic weight no doubt stroke anxieties among its Southeast Asian neighbors, worries that have been accentuated by the aggressive foreign policy of President Xi Jinping. But those concerns must be weighed against the necessity of maintaining political and economic ties with Asia's biggest power. No country in Southeast Asia will accept an exclusive relationship with China or the United States or any other power. No country will pick a side.[77]

Japan is well aware of this stance among Southeast Asian countries and is attempting to steer a third path. This involves accepting the growing economic influence of China in the region while maintaining close political and security ties with the United States and, at the same time, strengthening ties to Southeast Asia. It is part of a diversification strategy that Japan has adopted since the end of the Cold War, when the postwar bipolar structure evolved into the multipolar structure we see now. Japanese leaders share Kausikan's admonition to the United States:

> Biden should be cautious about promoting American values in response to Trump's indifference to them. Such values are not necessarily a strategic asset in Southeast Asia, where they are not shared by all. 'Democracy' is a protean term, 'human rights' is subject to many interpretations, and Southeast Asia generally places more emphasis on the rights of the community than on those of the individual.[78]

Yachi Shotaro, the former vice minister of foreign affairs who served as Abe's first head of the National Security Council from January 2014 to September 2019, gave a speech in Tokyo to Japanese opinion leaders at the end of last year in which he essentially validated the diversification analysis provided above. His central point was the importance of Japan maintaining its close alliance with the United States based on the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty, while at the same time pursuing good relations with China as an important "neighboring

country." He emphasized the need for Japan to maintain a sense of balance and to oppose the "decoupling" from China that some Americans have advocated. He also pointed to the importance to Japan of the Quad, the Free and Open Indo-Pacific, India, Australia, and ASEAN. In addition, he stated that the European Union—in particular Britain, France, and Germany—should get more engaged in ensuring the future of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific.[79] Although he did not use the word diversification, that is in fact what he was advocating for, for the future of Japan's diplomacy.

Additional ways in which Japan can realize this diversification include expanding the CPTPP to include other countries and economies; implementing the 15-country RCEP (Regional Economic Comprehensive Partnership), which was ratified by the Diet on April 28;[80] pursuing other bilateral and multilateral economic arrangements; and engaging more actively in international organizations and institutions, including the WHO (World Health Organization), WTO (World Trade Organization), and WIPO (World Intellectual Property Organization).

Conclusion

Biden's inauguration in January 2021 has not slowed Japan's pursuit of strategic diversification, but it has slowed the attempt to navigate a middle course between the United States and China. On April 16, Biden welcomed Suga to the White House as the first foreign leader to meet in person since assuming the presidency.[81] The meeting achieved the goals that each side had set. For Biden, it was an opportunity to: (1) demonstrate to Japan its importance as an American ally; (2) signal to China that, despite its efforts to woo Japan during the Trump administration, Japan remains firmly allied with the United States; (3) commit Japan to working closely with the United States on issues ranging from security to trade, investment, technology, climate change, and human rights; and (4) show the American electorate (and the world) that he is rejecting his predecessor's denigration of partners and allies and working closely with them to counter China's growing influence.

For Suga, the meeting was important to: (1) show the Japanese public that, despite his reputation as a local politician with little experience in foreign policy (unlike his predecessor), he can be trusted to manage Japan's relationship with the United States; (2) demonstrate to China that Japan has the firm support of the United States to protect Japan (including the Senkaku Islands) under the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty; (3) demonstrate to North Korea that Japan has the firm support of the United States, including on the issue of Japanese abductees; and (4) show Japanese voters that in the elections expected this fall, Suga deserves to be reelected as president of the LDP (and therefore continue as prime minister) and that the LDP should be reelected to maintain control of the Lower House of the Diet.

In addition to the joint press conference held immediately after the meeting,[82] three documents were issued that specified what the two leaders had agreed to: (1) "U.S.-Japan Global Partnership for a New Era";[83] (2) "U.S.-Japan Competitiveness and Resilience (CoRe) Partnership";[84] and (3) "U.S.-Japan Climate Partnership on Ambition, Decarbonization, and Clean Energy."[85] These, along with the "Joint Statement of the U.S.-Japan Security Consultative Committee (Two-Plus-Two)," issued in Tokyo on March 16 after the Two-Plus-Two meeting between Blinken and Austin and their Japanese counterparts,[86] constitute the framework for future cooperation between the two governments.

What attracted particular attention in Japan were the passages in the "U.S.-Japan Global Partnership for a New Era" that expressed "concerns over Chinese activities that are inconsistent with the international rules-based order, including the use of economic and other forms of coercion."[87] Furthermore, "We underscore the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait and encourage the peaceful resolution of cross-Strait issues," the document stated.[88] The last American and Japanese leaders to mention Taiwan in a joint statement were President Richard Nixon and Prime Minister Sato Eisaku in 1969, reflecting the heightened recent concern by both the United States and Japan that China may be preparing to act in ways contrary to a "peaceful resolution" of this issue.[89]

The Chinese government expressed "strong dissatisfaction" with the U.S.-Japan joint statement and countered that the expression of concern meddled in China's affairs and "severely violates basic norms governing international relations...China deplores and rejects it...[the United States and Japan are] ganging up to form cliques and fanning bloc confrontation."[90] Some Japanese are worried that Suga may have gone too far in aligning with the United States against China and that he should have been "more ambiguous" in his wording. For instance, Takeuchi Yukio, Japan's former vice minister of foreign affairs, argued that Japan had "crossed the Rubicon" and should prepare for "retaliation" from China.[91]

However, a time-honored Japanese maxim should be kept in mind: "*soron sansei, kakuron hantai.*" The English translation would be "agree in principle, disagree on the specifics," or "the devil is in the details." The four documents cited above contain specific programs and initiatives in which the United States and Japan will engage to deepen their "global partnership for a new era." But the documents also contain many statements of principles, aspirations, and direction. Fleshing these out into concrete actions to produce tangible results will require considerable work, since whether in the areas of security, trade, technology, climate change, or human rights, the American and Japanese concepts, interests, and priorities vis-à-vis China are not identical. The Chinese government fully realizes this, and thus its reactions so far have been limited to verbal denunciations, not retaliatory actions.

As indicated by the intense attention in Japan given to what Suga did and did not commit to Biden regarding China during their summit meeting of April 16, many Japanese remain concerned that the United States may have unrealistic expectations of Japan when it comes to supporting the United States in its military activities in the region, especially regarding Taiwan.[92] For instance, under strong criticism from Beijing, Suga stated in a Diet meeting on April 20 that the reference to Taiwan in the joint statement "does not presuppose [Japan's] military involvement at all."[93] The Biden Administration also expects greater security cooperation between Japan and South Korea, not necessarily welcomed by the two countries.[94]

Another uncertainty for Japan is the extent to which the Biden administration will expect Japan to cooperate with the United States in imposing economic sanctions against China.[95] American leaders, based perhaps on their Cold War experience, tend to place primacy on military strength as the key determinant of national security and tend to underestimate how much Japan and China place importance on economic—especially technological—competitiveness as a source of national power. American policymakers will need to

develop a much more sophisticated and nuanced understanding of the complex interplay between military security and economic competitiveness, in order to persuade Japan to work effectively with the United States regarding economic sanctions against China.

A more general uncertainty and concern for Japan is America's economic presence in Asia. Japan has kept the door open for the United States to return to the TPP (now CPTPP), but this is unlikely to be realized soon. The main reason is the view by many in the Biden administration that the economic benefits to the United States of joining are not as large or as immediate as desired when weighed against the political capital required to forge the consensus necessary to join. In particular, Biden's pledge to pursue "a foreign policy for the middle class" (based on the report of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace issued in September 2020) may constrain the administration from embracing international trade agreements as readily as in the past.[96]

Human rights is another area in which Japan's perspectives and policies are not necessarily aligned with those of the United States.[97] This derives from three sources. First, because Japan's postwar Constitution has limited Japan's ability to use military strength to wield influence abroad, it has concentrated its efforts on diplomacy, which by definition prioritizes dialogue and discussion over the unilateral withdrawal and termination of relationships.[98] Second, Japan's notion of promoting human rights (like that of many other Asian countries) is more communal, social, and holistic than the American focus on the legalistic individual rights of freedom of speech, expression, press, assembly, etc. Finally, as a Japanese Diet member recently explained, "When a bully at school is challenged by a group of students, the bully is most likely to lash out at the weakest among the challengers. We in Japan are afraid that if we side against China with the U.S., China will retaliate, but not against the U.S., because it is so powerful, but against Japan, because we are the most vulnerable."[99]

The governments of the United States and Japan have announced that the two countries are embarking on a "global partnership for a new era." The general principles and framework have been outlined, and now the specific contents need to be agreed to and acted upon. How Japan deals with China will depend in large part on how confident Japan is of America's power, stability, consistency, predictability, and reliability. But there is no doubt that the pandemic has accelerated Japan's quest for strategic diversification.

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