



The U.S.-Japan Alliance under the Biden Administration
Stimson-CIGS Next Generation Roundtable Series
February 2, 2021

SUMMARY

Panelists

Ryosuke Hanada

Zachary M. Hosford

Yuki Tatsumi (moderator)

On February 2, 2021, the Stimson’s Japan Program hosted a roundtable via WebEx Meeting to discuss the U.S.-Japan alliance under new leadership in both the United States and Japan. Yuki Tatsumi, director of the Japan Program, moderated the roundtable with Ryosuke Hanada (Doctoral Candidate, Macquarie University, Australia) and Zachary M. Hosford (Acting Director, Asia Program, German Marshall Fund of the United States) joining as guest speakers. The discussion began with Tatsumi introducing both of the speakers, and asking the viewers to ask questions via the chat box.

Tatsumi opened with a question for Hanada on the greatest foreign and national security policy legacy of the Abe administration, and asked the same of Hosford for the Trump administration. Hanada observed that Abe’s legacy had two major components. First, his structural reform in foreign and security policy included the creation of key institutions such as the National Security Council and legal changes like the Legislation on Peace and Security. In terms of Japan’s post-war history, these changes have been the most influential for Japan’s ability to contribute to regional security. Second, Abe expanded Japan’s diplomatic focus beyond the immediate Asia-Pacific neighborhood to include Southeast Asia, Australia, India, and later Europe. Hanada emphasized Abe’s visit to all ten ASEAN countries in 2013, a first for a Japanese prime minister. Hanada added that this diplomatic legacy led into his formulation of the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP), a broad concept of the region’s connectivity that became even more important when the Trump administration’s foreign policy fell short in areas of economic and security cooperation. The Quad, too, was one of Abe’s accomplishments that became possible over his tenure due to the growing need, as China rose in the region, for a platform for India, Australia, Japan, and the United States to have informal discussions. On the whole, Abe’s legacy was to make Japan more active and proactive in the Indo-Pacific region.

Hosford summed up the Trump legacy as a “contradiction,” creating doubt about the United States’ commitments to its international roles while also taking a stronger stance on China. Compared to Japan’s efforts to increase engagement with Europe under Abe, transatlantic relations under Trump moved in the opposite direction; while Japan worked to save the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the United States under Trump moved against multilateral free trade

agreements. Hosford also noted a unique challenge of the Trump administration, that White House statements or tweets easily undermined policy progress made by officials at various agencies. In terms of the U.S.-Japan alliance, the Trump administration took a transactional approach towards alliances, a perspective that came across in alliance negotiations as disrespectful. The Trump administration view that alliances were unequal partnerships to be used to the United States' advantage ran counter to the concept of alliance as resource-sharing and working together on shared challenges. Hosford cautioned that Trumpism persists in the United States, but also added that the Trump approach to China, while not executed with much skill, was a welcomed change in drawing attention to China's problematic policies in economic and security areas.

Tatsumi asked the speakers to assess the biggest foreign policy challenges for Prime Minister Suga and President Biden. Hosford stated that the Biden administration need to reestablish the credibility of the United States in the international system. Credibility is lost easily and difficult to regain, so it will be a major challenge for Biden. In addition, Biden faces increasing Chinese coercive power in the international order, partially because of the Trump administration's abdication of U.S. leadership responsibilities and degradation of international ties, but due as well to growing disinformation and infringement of human rights across the world. Biden will also face a more challenging strategic environment, especially in the Indo-Pacific, where the People's Liberation Army (PLA) is improving its capacity and capabilities, and where deterrence is becoming more difficult. There are also the ongoing Special Measures Agreement negotiations, which may not be as easy to conclude as watchers hoped, even under the Biden administration.

Hanada offered that Suga's greatest challenge would be to move beyond Abe's legacy and establish his own policies as prime minister. For Suga, who is well-versed in domestic policy, developing new ideas to promote the FOIP and improve the effectiveness of the U.S.-Japan alliance will be very difficult, and it does not seem that Suga has new ideas yet. Hanada also cautioned that the security environment has already changed in the short months since Suga's term began: the situation in the Taiwan Strait has become more serious than it was during the Abe administration, China has passed a new China Maritime Police Act, and the coronavirus pandemic is worsening in Japan, requiring a fiscal stimulus that may stymie efforts to increase defense spending. Moreover, Suga needs to address the question of "values" in the FOIP vision. The recent coup in Myanmar is an immediate concern, where the United States is already considering economic sanctions. Japan does value democracy highly, as does the United States, but the policy approach tends to be different. Hanada also agreed that the Host Nation Support issues will be a challenge for Suga as well.

Tatsumi opened the roundtable to the audience for questions. Vice Admiral Scott Van Buskirk asked where the speakers thought forward-basing discussions will go under the new administrations. Hanada noted that there is a strong consensus in Japan that forward-deployed U.S. forces are still needed in Japan, while friction between U.S. bases and the community remain a concern in Okinawa and elsewhere. From a strategic perspective, for Japan, the U.S. presence is indispensable for maintaining the regional balance of power. Hanada added that it is important to consider how the Japan Self-Defense Forces can increase their resources and improve interoperability with allies and partners. Hosford observed that, had the Trump

administration had another four years, there might have been a shift in the deployment of U.S. forces in Japan and elsewhere around the world. Under Biden, the perspectives of experts who have been appointed to senior positions in the administration, like Kurt Campbell and Ely Ratner, indicate that the United States will not likely reduce its commitment to its allies. Hosford agreed that in general there will be no changes to the basing, but the issues in Okinawa and the downward pressure on both the Japanese and the U.S. defense budgets will be a challenge. Hosford emphasized that creative solutions are needed, fully utilizing statecraft, to address the challenges in the security environment. Hosford also noted that the reduction of U.S. forces in the Middle East may help prioritize the Indo-Pacific posture.

John Bottimore asked the speakers how committed are both administrations to shaping the Quad. Hosford stated that the Biden administration will continue to make a strong push for the Quad, noting that increasing challenges from China make the Quad a more useful configuration. Hosford also pointed out that other countries can be added to the Quad and that other mechanisms are useful in other circumstances, since the Quad should not be viewed as the solution to all problems. Hanada observed that the Quad is, aside from the Malabar exercises, mostly the Foreign Ministers' Meeting, at which an array of security, rule of law, and human rights issues are discussed. Hanada expected Biden and Suga to continue the current form of the Quad, but questioned whether that would be sufficient to deter China. In addition, the four countries still have differences in priorities and security issues; for example, if the Quad focuses on the Indian Ocean, it is outside of Japan's interests. Hanada proposed that the four countries decide on a priority, specifically the South China Sea, and then consider adding other states to the coalition, such as maritime Southeast Asian states.

Lieutenant General Sadamasa Oue asked Hosford about the Biden administration's policy toward the Korean Peninsula, including the nuclearization of North Korea. Hosford noted that U.S. administrations try to deprioritize North Korea, despite North Korea's efforts otherwise. The Biden administration will probably focus more on China, and it is unlikely that U.S.-Korea relations will be as tumultuous as they were under Trump. Hosford speculated that Biden might follow a reactive policy—not necessarily strategic patience, but more focused on containment than a proactive stance. With South Korea, Hosford suggested that Biden would attempt to repair and reassure the alliance. Hanada added that Japan is concerned about whether Biden will overly intervene in Japan-South Korea relations. Perspectives in the Japanese government see requests to reconcile with the goal of improving trilateral relations with the United States as appropriate, but if the United States asked the two sides to compromise from the current standing point, that will not be a domestically acceptable outcome for Japan.

Eric Lee and Ken Spurlock asked how the new administrations would approach security cooperation with Taiwan, individually and under U.S.-Japan relations. Hanada pointed out that Suga had appointed Nobuo Kishi, who has an open interest in Taiwan Strait affairs, as defense minister, which has made China concerned. Hanada noted that Japan would not, however, engage in security cooperation with Taiwan, including selling equipment. Instead, Japan is likely to consider how to invite Taiwan to join the CPTPP, which is important for including Taiwan in the regional economic framework. Hosford observed that U.S. support for Taiwan will continue under Biden, though the policies will be aimed directly at supporting Taiwan rather than at

needling China. Hosford agreed that Taiwan should be included in the CPTPP, though a U.S.-Taiwan trade deal might be slow to develop.

Tetsuro Hisano asked a final question about how the Biden administration will prioritize foreign policy and balance the need to cooperate with China on some issues while also address human rights concerns. Hosford noted that the Biden administration would not go to an extreme on either values or interests, but would try to find a balance. However, he expected Biden and the Democratic-controlled Congress to push for human rights strongly. Hanada noted that the Japanese government assumes Biden will prioritize values over interests, while Japan takes a more pragmatic approach to its partnerships with strategically important countries, such as in Southeast Asia. Hanada asserted that the United States and Japan need to develop a coalition of like-minded states that can together promote strategic interest through economic means.

Tatsumi ended the discussion by thanking the speakers and the audience for their participation.