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PRIORITY ON DEALING WITH U.S–JAPAN ALLIANCE PERCEPTION GAP

By
Ben Ascione

When Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide becomes the first world leader to be hosted by US President Joe Biden on 16 April, restoring trust in the US–Japan alliance and deepening cooperation will top the agenda. This includes dealing with a still rising China, North Korea’s nuclear weapons, climate change and COVID-19.

Lloyd Austin, US Secretary of Defense (R) and Japanese Defense Minister Kishi Nobuo (L) attend a review an honour guard prior the US–Japan Defense Ministers Bilateral meeting at the Japan Ministry of Defense, Tokyo, Japan, 16 March, 2021 (Photo: David Mareuil/Pool via Reuters).

After the damage wrought by the Trump administration, the Biden administration’s focus on cooperation has been welcomed by US allies including Japan. Yet as China continues to rise and the United States encourages allies to take on greater burden sharing efforts, there is a risk of a serious perception gap emerging between Japan the United States.

The US–China high-level officials meeting in Alaska on 18 March showed that taking a tough posture towards China is a bipartisan endeavour in the United States. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken lambasted his Chinese counterparts over human rights in Xinjiang and Hong Kong, assertiveness toward Taiwan and the South China Sea, cyber attacks, and economic coercion to establish these credentials.

While Japan has serious concerns about Chinese behaviour, its approach has been more cooperative than confrontational in recent years. In October 2018, former prime minister Shinzo Abe visited Beijing and Japan signed MOUs with China on over 50 joint infrastructure projects in third countries. Chinese

President Xi Jinping was scheduled to make a reciprocal state visit to Japan in April 2020, but it was postponed due to the pandemic.

Under Suga, China doves and hawks in Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) are jostling for influence. The hawks sought to cancel Xi's visit in light of developments in Xinjiang and Hong Kong. LDP Secretary General Toshihiro Nikai, a key backer of Suga who has spearheaded engagement, fended off the cancellation, but the visit is not expected to take place during 2021. While Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi urged China to address human rights in Xinjiang, Japan has shied away from imposing economic sanctions, citing its lack of a legal framework for that action.

The United States should be prepared for Japan to take a more moderate approach towards China. Japan will likely work to continue incrementally to increase the roles and missions of the Japan Self-Defense Forces (SDF) within the framework of its 'peace' Constitution and the US-Japan alliance. And it will seek a continued clear commitment from the United States to deter Chinese military provocations, especially around the Senkaku Islands (which China claims as the Diaoyu Islands) after China passed a new law last month giving the Chinese Coast Guard wider power to use weapons.

US ambitions to have Japan play a more significant military role vis-a-vis China are likely to end in disappointment. While Japan passed security legislation in 2015 permitting the SDF to engage in limited forms of collective self-defence, constitutional restrictions still essentially bar it from using force for purposes that aren't exclusively defence oriented. Moreover, public opinion still favours the Article 9 'peace clause' of the Constitution and shows little appetite for SDF engagement in combat missions that risk casualties.

On North Korea, both leaders favour taking a tough approach. Biden differentiated his stance by chastising Donald Trump for being too friendly with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un. Suga will be keen to show his toughness against North Korea for the domestic audience while requesting US assistance in seeking the return of Japanese citizens abducted by North Korea. Biden has sought to resurrect US-Japan-ROK trilateral cooperation that Trump neglected. But the key bottleneck here is tensions between Japan and South Korea over the comfort women and forced labour issues, which dampen the two countries' enthusiasm to cooperate despite their shared interest to reign in North Korea's nuclear weapons.

Mitigating climate change and combatting COVID-19 provide fertile ground for US-Japan cooperation.

On climate change, President Biden was quick to return the United States to the Paris Agreement and is set to host a virtual climate change summit with 40 world leaders on 22-23 April. Prime Minister Suga has committed Japan to net-zero carbon emissions by 2050. Given that Japanese and US financial institutions lead the world in private lending in support of coal, and Japan is one of the top public lenders supporting coal, under their new leaderships the two countries have the potential to drive an energy transformation away

from fossil fuels and toward renewable energy and could establish a clean energy partnership to this end.

On COVID-19, given that Japan and the United States have a long history of cooperation on international health, their dearth of cooperation to fight the pandemic is surprising. Fears abound that the Tokyo Olympics will become a super spreader event. A majority of Japanese public opinion disapproves of the Suga government's handling of the pandemic after Japan's state of emergency was lifted just in time for the start of the Olympic torch relay. The Suga government seems stubbornly intent on hosting the Olympics despite over 80 per cent of Japanese public opinion favouring either cancellation or postponement.

The greater exchange of information to combat COVID-19 is low hanging fruit. This includes Japan's use of its supercomputer in AI-based COVID-19 research, the experience of US doctors in treating COVID-19 patients, and the logistics of the Biden administration's vaccine rollout. Japan and the United States could also lend greater support to multilateral efforts, such as the World Health Organization and EU-driven Access to COVID Tools Accelerator, to help prevent global spread and get the world vaccinated before vaccine-resistant mutations emerge.

The Biden-Suga summit provides an important opportunity to get US-Japan cooperation back on track after four years of work just preventing a Trump-induced disaster in alliance relations. But to best deepen cooperation and prevent perception gaps, the two allies need to not shy away from uncomfortable discussions.

Ben Ascione is Assistant Professor at the Graduate School of Asia-Pacific Studies, Waseda University.

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CENTRE FOR DEFENCE AND INTERNATIONAL SECURITY STUDIES (CDISS)
National Defence University of Malaysia
Sungai Besi Camp, 57000 Kuala Lumpur
Phone: (+603) 9051 3400 ext. 4618
Fax: (+603) 9051 3031
E-mail: cdiss@upnm.edu.my