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The United States and Asia in 2020

Free, Open, and Worried?

ABSTRACT

In 2020, the United States sought to implement its policy of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific to address the challenge of a rising China. US–China antagonism increased, spurred on by economic tensions and concerns for Beijing’s actions with respect to Hong Kong, Taiwan, the South China Sea, and the Uighurs, with all this occurring in the context of the global pandemic. As the Trump administration came to a close, the most pressing question was how the turn to great power competition, which intensified in 2020, would evolve under a Biden administration.

KEYWORDS: US foreign policy, Trump, China, North Korea, India

INTRODUCTION

In June 2019, the US Department of Defense released its Indo-Pacific strategy, with the theme of maintaining a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), a concept first proposed by former Japanese prime minister Abe Shinzo. The State Department followed with its own FOIP strategy, which echoed earlier strategy documents calling for free and fair trade, freedom of the seas, protecting state sovereignty, promoting good governance, and maintaining a regional order based on international law. These documents specifically call out China in unambiguous language as the chief challenge to the regional order. In 2020, the US sought to implement that strategy in the midst of the

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global COVID-19 pandemic and the economic upheaval brought on by efforts to control the outbreak.

Worries abound. While proponents of the FOIP strategy were delighted that the US was finally discarding the ill-conceived efforts of previous administrations to draw China into the rules-based international order as a “responsible stakeholder,” many thought this course correction should have come much sooner and that the US had already ceded too much to China heading into this period of great power competition.

Others in Asia and the US worry that US power is in such a decline that Washington may not have the ability or commitment to follow through with its FOIP strategy. Moreover, though the strategy proclaims the importance of allies and partners, the White House has often undercut that message through its criticism and actions. There are also fears among allies and partners that US retrenchment reflects an underlying current of isolation that runs more deeply in the US public and will last beyond this administration.

Most observers agree that Chinese actions have been increasingly aggressive and concerning, particularly since Xi Jinping came to power in 2013. Yet another set of worries emanates from those who fear the US is pushing too hard and too fast in confronting China. Certainly, Chinese actions have been worrisome, including its treatment of the Uighurs, the increasingly authoritarian nature of Chinese governance, growing pressure on Hong Kong, South China Sea claims and intimidation, threatening actions toward Taiwan, and predatory economics, among others. While proponents agree the US must push back against this behavior, they also fear it is a mistake to drive US–China relations back to the hostility of another Cold War. In particular, there are many transnational issues, including climate change, pandemics, and nuclear proliferation, along with regional challenges such as North Korea, that require cooperation and multilateral solutions that will be difficult to achieve if relations continue to deteriorate.

Finally, many in Asia depend on China as the greatest source of economic opportunity. As US–China relations continue their decline, the long-voiced worry from the region, “don’t make us choose,” grows louder. Moreover, reports from the region indicate less confidence in the US as a leader and security provider. It is not that the growth of Chinese power and influence is welcome, but it is a fact. China will always be in Asia, and there are doubts about US power and resolve.

Throughout 2020, all of these worries were evident and compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic. This essay will examine the state of US–China relations, changes in US policy for the South China Sea, the continued denuclearization deadlock with North Korea, mixed US signals to allies, and convergence in US–India relations.

US–CHINA RELATIONS IN FREEFALL

In the early days of 2020, the US–China trade war that began in 2018 appeared to show some signs of abating. On January 15, 2020 President Trump and Chinese Vice Premier Liu He signed a “phase one” trade deal to address some of the points of friction. The US agreed to reduce some of the tariffs on Chinese goods, while China committed to buying US\$ 200 billion’s worth of US goods, especially automobiles and agricultural products. China also pledged to improve intellectual property protection and address forced technology transfers for companies doing business in China. Prior to the agreement, the US also agreed to remove China from its list of currency manipulators. However, most US tariffs remained in place, and other issues, such as Chinese government subsidies, were left for follow-on talks.

Any hopes of better relations were quickly dashed by the growing shadow of the pandemic. As the first reports of the virus came from China, on January 20 the US acknowledged its first case: a man who had travelled to Wuhan, China. At the end of the month, Washington declared a health emergency, issued a quarantine order for any US citizen who had traveled to the Wuhan area, and barred entry of any non-US citizen who had recently visited China.

The virus created an opportunity for collaboration, but instead relations worsened. Trump called COVID-19 the “China virus” and criticized Beijing for withholding information on the outbreak. China responded by accusing the US military of bringing the virus to China during a sports competition the previous October. Throughout the rest of 2020, the US and China traded barbs about the virus, and relations continued to deteriorate.

Other issues flared throughout the year. Since 2019, pro-democracy demonstrations in Hong Kong have intensified, calling for autonomy from the mainland and increased political liberalization, along with resistance to Chinese efforts to squelch calls for reform. In June 2020, Beijing passed a national security law that criminalized subversive and secessionist activities as well as

collusion with foreign entities. These draconian measures were intended to assert greater Chinese control over Hong Kong and stifle freedom of expression and political opposition.

In response, Trump issued an executive order that revoked Hong Kong's special status with the US, removing special trade provisions, restricting access to sensitive technologies, and treating Hong Kong passports as Chinese. The measure was intended to punish China, but the Hong Kong economy paid the greater price. When Trump signed this order, he also signed the Hong Kong Autonomy Act passed by Congress two weeks earlier. The law sanctioned Chinese government officials and Hong Kong police who were responsible for imposing and implementing the new security law, while also sanctioning any banks that did business with them.

Friction also spilled over into the press corps. In February, the State Department designated five Chinese media outlets as “foreign missions” of the Chinese state. The following day, China responded by expelling three *Wall Street Journal* reporters for using a derogatory title in an opinion piece. Soon after, the US retaliated by reducing the number of Chinese journalists permitted in the US. Two weeks later, China expelled 13 US journalists from other news organizations, including the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. The tit-for-tat media war calmed down in May, after the US tightened visa rules for Chinese journalists.

In July the US took action against Chinese cyber theft. On the 21st, the US indicted two Chinese hackers for stealing COVID-19 vaccine research and sanctioned 11 Chinese companies for their involvement in human rights abuses against the Uighurs. The following day, the US ordered the closing of the Chinese consulate in Houston. The State Department accused Chinese diplomats of economic espionage and theft of scientific research, possibly COVID-19 vaccine information, noting that this facility was notorious for these types of actions. As expected, China retaliated the next day by ordering the closure of the US consulate in Chengdu.

Perhaps most serious has been the growing worry over Taiwan as a potential flashpoint in US–China relations. For years, the US has maintained a defense commitment to Taiwan of “strategic ambiguity,” which acknowledged Beijing's “One China” position but also sought to deter the mainland from seizing Taiwan by force. Under the Taiwan Relations Act, passed in 1979, the US is committed to selling defensive weapons to Taiwan, which makes China irate whenever a sale occurs. In October 2020, the US sold US\$

2.37 billion worth of missiles and sensors to Taiwan, and China promptly sanctioned the US defense contractors that make those weapons systems. However, the US has also refrained from providing Taipei an unequivocal security commitment for fear of encouraging Taipei to pursue independence in the belief that the US would defend Taiwan from the certain Chinese response. Thus, the US commitment has been ambiguous, in hopes of keeping both China and Taiwan from moving in a direction that would upset the status quo.

As 2020 progressed, cross-Strait relations worsened. Taiwan viewed with alarm the events unfolding in Hong Kong and saw that China's mantra of "One China, Two Systems" was unlikely to go well for them. As China conducted more military exercises and crossed the informal median line (halfway between Taiwan and the mainland), a line that was respected by both sides for years, tensions escalated. Two high-profile visits by US officials to Taiwan complicated matters further but demonstrated the US commitment to Taiwan.

In the wake of these events, some US analysts began to question the wisdom of maintaining "strategic ambiguity" and called for a more explicit US defense commitment to Taiwan to better deter a possible Chinese move to reunify by force. With the calls for a more determined US commitment, US National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien weighed in with a warning to China not to seize Taiwan by force, noting the difficulty of such an amphibious operation but also stating, "There's also a lot of ambiguity about what the United States would do in response to an attack by China on Taiwan." For the time being, strategic ambiguity remains US policy.

SOUTHEAST ASIA AND THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

Another regional flashpoint saw an important shift in US policy in a declaration by Secretary of State Michael Pompeo on the South China Sea. In a press statement in July, Pompeo reaffirmed US support for a free and open Indo-Pacific and maintained that China has no legal basis in international law for asserting its extensive claims with its "nine-dash line." He also said that Beijing's claims to the resources of any disputed islands beyond the 12 nmi territorial sea were illegal. While the US continued its policy of not taking a position on the competing sovereignty claims of states in the region,

Pompeo called out China for its efforts to bully other claimants into acceding to Beijing's unlawful position.

In essence, the change brought US policy in line with the Permanent Court of Arbitration's decisive 2016 ruling in favor of the Philippines and to China's detriment. Though the Obama administration had called for Chinese compliance with the ruling, it did not explicitly affirm the details. Pompeo's statement endorsed the ruling and labeled Chinese behavior "illegal," a strong accusation. The US policy shift is unlikely to have an immediate impact but does signal a more determined strategy to confront China in the region, and may lay the groundwork for follow-on measures, including economic sanctions or the mobilization of multilateral efforts to address these issues. However, it is not clear whether this will have much effect on Chinese actions.

US-NORTH KOREA RELATIONS: WHAT WAS YOUR CHRISTMAS GIFT?

After a plethora of summits in 2018 and 2019, efforts to seek the denuclearization of North Korea have stalled. Two months after the failed US–North Korea summit in Hanoi in February 2019, Kim Jong-un warned the Trump administration that it had until the end of the year to change its hostile policy. In the weeks leading up to the end of the year, North Korean officials maintained that the DPRK was no longer interested in denuclearization. One North Korean official offered the memorable ultimatum that it was up to the US to determine what Christmas gift it would receive, depending on Washington's willingness to show more flexibility in its policy. With the Trump administration sticking to its previous position, many analysts expected the gift to be a nuclear weapon or ballistic missile test in 2020.

The holidays came and went with no "present," but despite the hopes of the previous two years, US–North Korea dialogue made no progress in 2020. Though Kim declared that North Korea was no longer bound by its testing moratorium, he chose not to cross the line with a long-range missile test that would have angered Trump. North Korea was not shy about launching numerous short-range missiles, much to the displeasure of South Korea and Japan, but Trump downplayed the significance of these actions.

The months passed with no signs of resumption of the diplomatic process that had begun in 2018. South Korea continued its efforts to restart dialogue

with the North, but Pyongyang showed little interest and was openly hostile to the Moon administration's overtures. Kim Yo-jong, Kim Jong-un's trusted sister, also downplayed the possibility and usefulness of another US–North Korea summit, maintaining that Washington would only use such talks for domestic political purposes. Secretary Pompeo noted that he was hopeful for high-level talks and that more was going on with North Korea than had been made public. Yet he remained skeptical that Trump and Kim would meet before the election.

As the summer passed, many analysts began to raise the possibility of an “October surprise,” where Trump and Kim would hold a short-notice summit to once more seek an agreement advancing North Korean denuclearization. Many also speculated that the meeting would be a high-profile event to boost Trump's reelection chances. Indeed, given Kim's likely assessment that a Trump victory was his best chance to cut a favorable deal with Washington, he might have been willing try another summit. In the end, none of this came to pass.

Instead of a summit, the October surprise turned out to be in the parade for the 75th anniversary of the founding of the Korean Workers' Party. During the festivities, Kim Jong-un unveiled North Korea's newest missile, the largest mobile intercontinental ballistic missile on the planet, along with other items that showcased North Korea's military modernization efforts. Kim had warned that North Korea would develop a new strategic weapon in 2020; perhaps the US had finally received its Christmas gift after all. As Trump waited out his last weeks in the White House, denuclearization remained on hold; it would have to wait until the incoming Biden administration completed a review of North Korea policy.

ALLIES: WORRIED AND CONFUSED

US allies had a difficult year. Every high-level US strategy document proclaims the importance of allies and partners for US interests and for regional peace and stability. Yet the implementation of a consistent strategy, along with US appreciation and collaboration with allies, was sometimes difficult to find. The messages have been contradictory. The Defense and State Departments have continued to work closely with Asian allies, but the White House took a more transactional approach that often focused on money, with little understanding of the strategic value of these relationships.

Japan has largely been able to avoid Trump's criticism, in large part thanks to former prime minister Abe Shinzo's efforts to establish close ties with Washington. Despite Trump's occasional criticism over trade and the limits on Japan's contributions to the alliance, US–Japan relations have remained relatively good.

South Korea was not so fortunate. The year began with Trump criticizing the award of the 2020 Oscar for Best Picture to the South Korean film *Parasite*. Trump also expressed doubt of South Korea's success in dealing with COVID-19 and continued to challenge South Korea on trade. The inability to conclude another burden-sharing agreement has been the most serious point of friction.

In March 2019, after several rounds of contentious talks, negotiators finally signed an agreement where Seoul would pay US\$ 920 million for the year to share the cost of US troops in South Korea, an 8.2% increase from 2018. In August 2019, talks began again for what had now become an annual process, rather than the more sensible five-year deals of the past. Reports indicated that Washington's opening ask was US\$ 5 billion, more than five times the previous amount. As talks dragged into 2020, the US position reportedly shifted to twice the 2019 deal, then to "cost plus 50%," and then to its current position of US\$ 1.3 billion. South Korea has offered US\$ 1.04 billion, a 13% increase, but the talks deadlocked. As the US presidential election approached, it became clear that South Korean officials were running out the clock, hoping for a Biden win and a better deal.

Japanese officials have been watching these events closely. Their burden-sharing agreement with the US expires in 2021. With Biden's victory, both Seoul and Tokyo breathed a sigh of relief, hoping to conclude their respective agreements in a more amicable and equitable manner.

US–INDIA CONVERGENCE? YES, BUT IT'S COMPLICATED

US–Indian relations began 2020 with Trump traveling to New Delhi for a summit meeting with Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The February visit followed Modi's trip the previous year to Houston, where Trump hosted a meeting and a "Howdy Modi" rally with 50,000 attendees. There were modest hopes that progress might be made in settling the contentious trade issues between Washington and New Delhi. The US has been pushing for

greater market access and reduced tariffs, particularly in agriculture sectors, to reduce India's trade surplus of over US\$ 23 billion in 2019.

Friction over trade had been building since 2018, when the Trump administration placed tariffs on Indian steel and aluminum, and the following year ended India's preferential trade status as a developing country. India retaliated with tariffs on close to 30 US products. Trump's immigration policies, especially the suspension of H-1B visas along with limiting the number of Indian students coming to the US, have further angered Indians in both countries. At the end of the visit, Trump admitted that little progress was made, remarking that Modi was a tough negotiator and that a deal might not be reached until 2021. The meeting did produce a few small agreements, including India's purchase of US\$ 3 billion's worth of US helicopters and other defense equipment, an energy deal, and a mental health initiative.

The summer of 2020 may have brought a turning point. In the past, many US analysts have looked hopefully to India as a potential partner and one of the few states that could effectively help balance Chinese power in the region. Despite these hopes, India has long resisted US overtures, seeking to maintain its autonomy, which was grounded in the Cold War-era Non-Aligned Movement. Yet, as a result of the Sino-Indian confrontation that began in May in Ladakh, part of the contested region of Kashmir, India has moved closer to the US, much to the delight of Washington. India has also shown much more interest in participating in "the Quad," a fledgling multilateral organization of Australia, Japan, India, and the US. In the past, India was reluctant to participate for fear of provoking China, but in October it joined a foreign ministers' gathering of the group to explore future cooperation. Later in October, then-Secretary of Defense Mark Esper and Secretary of State Pompeo traveled to India to capitalize on growing Sino-Indian tensions and sign an agreement on sharing military satellite information.

Mutual concern for China has prompted this convergence of US and Indian interests, but it is not clear how deep and enduring their relationship will be. Friction over trade issues, Indian purchases of Russian weapons systems, and Trump's immigration policies remain that could temper the future of the relationship. Time will tell.

CONCLUSION

With the Biden administration, there will likely be both change and continuity from the Trump years. The most difficult challenge will continue to be US–China relations. In 2020, the US made an unambiguous shift to confronting China on multiple issues, and much of this policy is likely to continue under a Biden presidency. The challenge remains to keep US–China ties from spiraling into unbridled hostility and effectively manage the most important bilateral relationship in international relations.