

RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical and contemporary issues. The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email to Mr Yang Razali Kassim, Editor RSIS Commentary at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.

Two Summits: Enter the US' Sinocentric Era

By Adam Garfinkle

SYNOPSIS

The Sinocentric era in US foreign policy has truly begun, with the first face-to-face White House visits of the Biden administration from the leaders of two Asian security treaty allies: the prime minister of Japan and the president of South Korea.

COMMENTARY

BENEATH THE inevitable distractions that attend the start of any US administration — a mini-war in Gaza, a virtual climate summit show and an Afghanistan withdrawal decision drama, for examples — is a policy priority template about to unfurl; wise observers can discern this by focussing on the order of early presidential attention and time allotted to foreign leaders. That President Joe Biden's first two face-to-face bilaterals have been with major treaty allies in East Asia is not without significance.

Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga's visit on 16 April 2021 and South Korean (ROK) President Moon Jae-in's arrival on 21 May, signal that the Sinocentric era in US policy is clearly upon us. These meetings should be seen as the first acts in a globe-sprawling drama bound to play out long before us.

Irking the Dragon

It helped that both summits followed on the heels of the testy language offered up during a meeting between Secretary of State Antony Blinken and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan with China's top diplomats, CCP foreign affairs chief Yang Jiechi and China's State Councilor Wang Yi, in Anchorage, Alaska on 18 March. Senior US officials usually do not quietly rejoice when headlines report "barbed exchanges", "war of words", and "rage".

This time, however, the headlines fit the purpose of teeing up productive summits. Chinese behaviour at and on the sidelines of the virtual Climate Summit of April 22-23, at once dissimulative and condescending, helped further as Suga departed and Moon prepared to arrive. A frothing common adversary does wonders for bilateral security alliances.

That said, Biden's meetings with Prime Minister Suga and President Moon could hardly have differed more in tone. China, along with North Korea (DPRK), loomed large in both, yet larger still was the impact of domestic politics on all sides. Unlike the case in the US and South Korea, Japanese politics today are notably not polarised or out of sync with US assumptions and expectations. But Japanese and South Korean diplomatic postures are polarised, making US efforts to triangulate effective alliance strategy in Northeast Asia a persistent chore.

This is the more so when Korean politics churns up a leader at odds with US security premises. Thus, despite some enduring differences of view, the US-Japan summit was a love fest compared to the US-ROK affair, where dissonance snuck through despite the exertions of diplomatic etiquette.

Suga Sweet

Suga has been prime minister only since September 2020, having been Chief Cabinet Secretary under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe from 2012 to his elevation as prime minister. At age 72, Suga seems a compromise candidate within the ruling Liberal Democratic Party, and a transitional figure waiting upon the next generation to sort itself out.

Experienced US officials fret that Suga's might be one in a series of short-lived and therefore weak prime ministerial tenures, as was the case between the end of Junichiro Koizumi's time in office in 2006 and Abe's consolidation of authority in 2012. Presaged by the sherpa-like 16 March Tokyo visit of Secretary of State Blinken and Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin, Washington recognised these limits, so focused on making digestible incremental improvements in the relationship.

The two joint statements, of 16 March and 16 April, thus tracked well as lines of talk without much in the way of deliverables. Most notable was how strongly anti-Chinese both were. Much US-based commentary ranked this as an American achievement, but in truth the Japanese preferred the more muscular US approach of the Trump period to that of the inert second Obama administration, and hoped to bind the Biden administration to that toughened tack.

That proved easy, for the politics of being anti-PRC now resonate loudly — too loudly, perhaps — for Democrats against the populist-infused optic of trade issues; dising China has become a centrepiece of the “foreign policy for the middle class”.

Japan's Two Concerns

The final section of the 16 April Joint Statement, “An Alliance for a New Era,” which emphasised the “non-traditional” aspects of national security so dear to many Democratic foreign policy thinkers, punctuated the point in a decidedly novel way.

At US behest, the allies formed a “Competitive and Resilience Partnership” focused on “competitiveness and innovation, COVID-19 response, global health, and health security, climate change, clean energy, and green growth and recovery”.

Behind such high-sounding if very broad language senior Japanese officials espy two trends of potential concern.

First, gone are the trade deficits harangues of the Trump era, but a mercantilist tilt yet abides in the fact that all these new elements are tied to US economic interests as perceived by key domestic constituencies. (The same was true for the multiple new international projects mooted within the rubric of the Climate Summit.)

What the Executive Branch is doing via diplomatic initiatives the Democrats in Congress are doing through the budget process: bend all rubrics and category slots to politically resonant domestic economic priorities. It makes sense: Lose the political battle at home, in 2022 and especially 2024, and security policy authority will be lost with it.

Jeopardising Deterrence and Defence

The Japanese also note that Washington has yet to apply to join the Trans-Pacific Partnership — now the CPTPP without US accession — or has even abrogated the absurd Trump-era punitive tariffs levied against Canada for being “a threat to US national security”. When Trade Representative Katherine Tai was asked why not, she answered “leverage”. Officials in Tokyo cannot have been pleased to hear that word.

Second, they wonder whether pursuit of non-traditional portfolios may eventually jeopardise deterrence and defence. They don’t cheer a Navy budget asking for fewer new ships and declining 2.2 percent in real terms against inflation, for it may presage requests that Japan reach deeper into its own pocket for the common defence.

They worry, too, about US officials switching out the aim of “denuclearising North Korea” for the “denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula”; that would threaten a much leaner US strategic deterrence posture in Northeast Asia supposedly made safe by unredeemable hopes that “putting diplomacy first” will persuade the DPRK out of its nukes.

Doomed to Succeed

That is the wider context for understanding Suga’s post-summit remark that he had a “meaningful debate” with Biden about democracy, human rights, rule of law, and what the elements of a stable Sino-American relationship truly are. The Japanese are enlightened realists and disparage lighter-than-air idealists no less than “America first” cynics. They are right to do so.

Most US-Japanese summits are doomed to succeed. Both sides need them to succeed for political reasons, and if palpable deliverables cannot be arranged, words must suffice.

We thus got no significant advance in coordinating US-Japanese naval command-

and-control capabilities, nor any new joint forum acknowledging Japan as a co-equal security policy development partner. We did get agreement that no blue sky would show between US and Japanese strategic priorities — so, for example, no missile deal with North Korea leaving out short-range rockets that can reach Japanese but not US soil.

In sum, we got modest advances in the evolution of greater Japanese security responsibility in a widening geographical orbit. That's all to the good, Suga sweet — for the US-Japan relationship is the linchpin for the entire Indo-Asian security network. It is not without major import for every Asian nation desirous of an open and free Indo-Pacific region. Now comes the hard work: concretising dulcet words into concrete achievements.

Adam Garfinkle is a non-resident Distinguished Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School for International Studies (RSIS) at the Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore.

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
T: +65 6790 6982 | E: rsispublications@ntu.edu.sg | W: www.rsis.edu.sg