

ASIAN INSIDER

US elections

MUCH AT STAKE

Policy continuity if Trump wins, but return to mainstream diplomacy likely in Biden victory



Nirmal Ghosh
US Bureau Chief
In Washington

If President Donald Trump squeezes out an election win and occupies the White House for another four years, there is little doubt there would be policy continuity, analysts say.

While reports suggest the President may change his Defence Secretary Mark Esper, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo will remain in the Cabinet, his loyalty burnished by his beaming in from Jerusalem at the Republican National Convention to support his boss.

China hawks such as economic adviser Peter Navarro will also remain in place. And the President is likely to demand more burden sharing from allies in return for troops on their soil – an issue for South Ko-

rea and Japan – or else he will withdraw some of them.

The bigger question is what to expect in a Joe Biden presidency.

Broadly, president Biden would be a “very traditional” leader, said Mr Curtis Chin, Milken Institute Asia fellow and a former United States ambassador to the Asian Development Bank.

“He grew up really in Washington, DC, in a sense, and he’s been in government for 40-plus years, and so we’ll see a return, good and bad, to what has been seen as mainstream diplomacy of an embrace of international organisations, of the norms of traditional diplomacy,” Mr Chin told The Straits Times.

Advisers to the former vice-president – and there are many – are generally unanimous that, should he win the election, the objective should be to “resuscitate” US diplomacy and alliances, and restore what is seen by them as America’s dented leadership, in part by re-engaging with multilateral organisations and institutions.

But within those broad outlines which everybody is on board with, there are differences over key chal-



lenges – and one of the biggest is China. Among Mr Biden’s foreign policy team and in the Democratic Party, there are those who maintain that the No. 1 existential threat is global warming, and the US must work with China on that – but that this issue should be isolated from the strategic competition which remains.

That, however, is an aspiration that may become a casualty of the realities of that great power competition – and there are those who recognise that as well.

Whether the two powers can cooperate on global challenges like climate change and pandemics is

an unanswered question.

While the early days of a Biden presidency will see the US returning to multilateralism by rejoining the Paris agreement on curbing global warming, it may be important not to show concessions to China, some of his advisers maintain, contending that it would be seen by Beijing as a sign of weakness. Better, they say, to first rejuvenate at home, and restore the US’ own leadership abroad.

Thus, China in the short term will likely continue to encounter robust pushback, and certainly more criticism on human rights.

The US will continue to supply

Taiwan with weapons.

The transactional approach to stationing US troops in Japan and South Korea will also be discarded; the status quo will be maintained and the troops will stay.

And North Korea’s chairman Kim Jong Un is likely to find that Mr Biden will offer a cold shoulder.

India may find a Biden administration hard to navigate after the bonhomie of the Trump presidency, analysts say. Traditionally, the Democratic Party raises more human rights concerns, and India has already been criticised by some Democratic lawmakers over New Delhi’s actions in Kashmir.

“If Biden becomes president, there will be much greater normalisation of high-level policy engagement with China,” Eurasia Group founder and president Ian Bremmer said in an online discussion this week. “Right now, on the Trump side, really the only place that you have significant regular high-level conversations is around the trade deal.”

He added: “On the national security side, on the tech side, on the climate side, on regular diplomatic relations, it is pretty broken (and) episodic.”

He said: “Biden will want to return to that immediately. Frankly,

If Mr Joe Biden wins the race to the White House, analysts expect the US to engage in more dialogues with China on a wider range of issues. PHOTO: REUTERS

the first three months of a Biden administration will not be about creating a lot of policy on China. It will be simply...rebuilding the dialogue. “I also think that Biden will reach out, not just to China, but also to everyone on a very assertive climate policy that the Chinese would like to be a part of.”

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Familiar experts may join Biden’s team

WASHINGTON • With his “big tent” approach, Democratic Party candidate Joe Biden is taking advice from a wide pool of some 2,000 experts on Asia, filtering down to a select group of people who may form part of his administration if he wins the election next week.

Many faces will be familiar in Asia from the Obama years.

1 Mr Antony Blinken, former deputy secretary of state and deputy national security adviser in the Obama administration, is officially a foreign policy adviser to Mr Biden and tweets foreign policy statements on Mr Biden’s behalf. Mr Blinken might have his pick of either the secretary of state or secretary of defence jobs.

2 Dr Kurt Campbell, chairman and chief executive of The Asia Group, was US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs from 2009 to 2013.

He was one of the architects of then President Barack Obama’s “pivot to Asia”.

3 Mr Jake Sullivan, currently a non-resident senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, was national security adviser to Mr Biden when he was vice-president.

4 Dr Ely Ratner, executive vice-president and director of studies at the Centre for a New American Security, served as deputy national security adviser to Mr Biden when he was vice-president and, earlier, in the office of Chinese and Mongolian affairs at the State Department.

Previously, he also worked as a professional staff member on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and in the office of then Senator Biden.

5 Ms Michele Flournoy was the highest-ranking woman at the Obama administration secretaries of defence Robert Gates and Leon Panetta.

At one time, Ms Flournoy was a suicide mission for himself and for his regime.”

– Mr Trump at the United Nations General Assembly on Sept 19, 2017

Nirmal Ghosh

What they have said on...

The US approach to Asia over the next four years can be gleaned from these sound bites:

	DONALD TRUMP	JOE BIDEN
Foreign policy	“From this moment on, it’s going to be America First. Every decision on trade, on taxes, on immigration, on foreign affairs, will be made to benefit American workers and American families.” – Mr Trump’s inaugural address on Jan 20, 2017	“The Biden foreign policy agenda will place the United States back at the head of the table, in a position to work with its allies and partners to mobilise collective action on global threats.” – Mr Biden’s Foreign Affairs commentary, “Why America Must Lead Again”, in Jan 2020
Allies	“The United States will forever be a great friend to the world, and especially to its allies. But we can no longer be taken advantage of, or enter into a one-sided deal where the United States gets nothing in return.” – Mr Trump at the United Nations General Assembly on Sept 19, 2017	“Let’s be clear: working cooperatively with other nations that share our values and goals doesn’t make America a sucker – it makes us more secure and more successful.” – Mr Biden’s foreign policy speech at the City University of New York on July 11, 2019
Trade	“We must protect our borders from the ravages of other countries making our products, stealing our companies, and destroying our jobs. Protection will lead to great prosperity and strength.” – Mr Trump’s inaugural address on Jan 20, 2017	“The wrong thing to do is to put our heads in the sand and say no more trade deals. Countries will trade with or without the US. The question is: Who writes the rules that govern trade? Who will make sure they protect workers, the environment, transparency, and middle-class wages? The US, not China, should be leading that effort.” – Mr Biden’s Foreign Affairs commentary, “Why America Must Lead Again”, in Jan 2020
China	“China’s pattern of misconduct is well known. For decades, they have ripped off the United States like no one has ever done before. But I never solely blamed China for this. They were able to get away with a theft like no one was able to get away with before because of past politicians and, frankly, past presidents.” – Mr Trump announcing actions against China at the Rose Garden on May 29, 2020	“The US does need to get tough with China... The most effective way to meet that challenge is to build a united front of US allies and partners to confront China’s abusive behaviours and human rights violations, even as we seek to cooperate with Beijing on issues where our interests converge, such as climate change, non-proliferation, and global health security.” – Mr Biden’s Foreign Affairs commentary, “Why America Must Lead Again”, in Jan 2020
Asean and the Asia-Pacific region	“The United States remains committed to Asean’s central role as a regional forum for total cooperation... We want our partners in the region to be strong, independent and prosperous, in control of their own destinies and satellites to no one. These are the principles behind our vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific.” – Mr Trump at the fifth US-Asean Summit in Manila on Nov 13, 2017	“We will also strengthen our alliances with Japan, South Korea, Australia and other Asian democracies, while sustaining an ironclad commitment to Israel’s security.” – Mr Biden on American leadership on his campaign website
North Korea	“The United States has great strength and patience, but if it is forced to defend itself or its allies, we will have no choice but to totally destroy North Korea. Rocket Man is on a suicide mission for himself and for his regime.” – Mr Trump at the United Nations General Assembly on Sept 19, 2017	“With North Korea, I will empower our negotiators and jump-start a sustained, coordinated campaign with our allies and others, including China, to advance our shared objective of a denuclearised North Korea.” – Mr Biden’s Foreign Affairs commentary, “Why America Must Lead Again”, in Jan 2020

TEXT: CHARISSA YONG STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

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What Asia wants

China

Beijing ready to coexist: Expert

Elizabeth Law
China Correspondent
In Beijing

Whoever wins the US presidential election next week, what is certain is that the relationship between Beijing and Washington has irrevocably changed and the hawkish stance towards China is likely to continue, analysts say.

Amid a trade war that never quite reached a detente and spiralling diplomatic relations also lie the conundrums of Hong Kong and Taiwan.

For the Chinese leadership, a win for either President Donald Trump or Mr Joe Biden will each bring its own set of challenges, but it would end the current China bashing that has dominated American politics, said Mr Wang Huiyao, an adviser to China’s Cabinet and founder of the Centre for China and Globalisation, a Beijing think-tank.

“Trump no longer has an election to win so this rhetoric against China, that tends to pop up around election season, will stop,” he said. “That is the time we would finally be able to come together at the table and talk again.”

An important area would be discussions of phases two and three of a comprehensive trade deal between the United States and China.



US President Donald Trump meeting his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in December 2018. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

CHINA BASHING WILL STOP

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Yet, these same attacks helped solidify President Xi Jinping’s position within China, drawing out a brand of nationalism sparked by a nation feeling it was under blight.

Mr Trump’s form of Twitter diplomacy also gave rise to “wolf warrior” diplomats in China, a more assertive and public form of conducting foreign policy.

There is also a sense in Beijing that Mr Biden would bring more to the table, offering cooperation in areas such as climate change and global public health.

“There is a worldwide public health emergency and we want to

cooperate in areas like vaccine development, but at the moment, it appears to be more of a competition,” Mr Wang said.

“There’s probably going to be more engagement and dialogue (under Biden) but, of course, the Democrats will push China on issues like human rights.”

The Trump administration has been outspoken about supporting democracy in Hong Kong and has continued to engage with Taiwan, which China views as a renegade province to be reunified by force if necessary.

“Beijing will likely step up its sabre-rattling following the election, but, in the event of a Biden victory, aim to avoid moves that would set back its engagement with the new administration,” wrote political consultancy Eurasia Group in a research note.

No matter who wins, the “structure of conflict” is likely to remain for the next decade or two, Mr Wang said. “But decoupling is impossible because we can’t live without the other, so China is ready to find a way to coexist.”

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Japan and S. Korea

US ties with allies ‘not well managed’

Chang May Choon
South Korea Correspondent
In Seoul
and **Walter Sim**
Japan Correspondent
In Tokyo

US President Donald Trump’s biggest achievement in East Asia would be his historic summit with Mr Kim Jong Un in Singapore in 2018, which marked the first time a sitting American leader met his North Korean counterpart to resolve the nuclear issue.

Mr Trump should get “due credit” for the meeting, said Dr Lee Seong-hyon of the Sejong Institute think-tank. But beyond that, he “really demonstrated an inability to comprehend the importance of allies for the US”, Dr Lee told The Straits Times.

Most experts agree Mr Trump mismanaged strategic alliances with Japan and South Korea, and extracted empty promises from North Korea and failed to curb China.

Democratic candidate Joe Biden, who is leading in opinion polls ahead of the US presidential election, will have to undo the mistakes of Mr Trump, they added.

Ewha Womans University’s associate professor of international studies Leif-Eric Easley said Mr Trump’s “mismanagement of alliances, trade and Covid-19 re-



US President Donald Trump and South Korean President Moon Jae-in with their wives at the White House in April last year. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

WIN-WIN APPROACH

Biden is a more traditional US leader who values alliances and who will take a more win-win approach rather than a more transactional zero-sum approach.



DR TOSH MINOHARA, who chairs the Research Institute for Indo-Pacific Affairs think-tank.

duced confidence in the US across Asia.” There is thus much for the next administration to correct.

US alliances with Japan and South Korea, originally meant to extend US influence in the region and form the backbone of global security, became a mere dollar game when Mr Trump demanded fivefold increases in defence cost-sharing from both allies and pressured them to reduce their trade surplus with the US.

The Trump administration also did little to mediate when a forced labour issue between South Korea and Japan escalated into a trade

war. US has also failed to get any concrete commitment on denuclearisation from North Korea.

Dr Tosh Minohara, who chairs the Research Institute for Indo-Pacific Affairs think-tank, said: “Biden is a more traditional US leader who values alliances and who will take a more win-win approach rather than a more transactional zero-sum approach.”

But this does not mean a repeat of former president Barack Obama’s relatively soft approach towards China or strategic patience towards North Korea.

“China now appears prominently in the US’ rear-view mirror, and the US can no longer play Mr Nice Guy,” said Dr Minohara.

Former US diplomat Glen Fukushima said a Biden administration will have “greater desire to work bilaterally with Japan, and multilaterally on issues like climate change, pandemics, North Korea and China”.

But if Mr Trump is re-elected, he is likely to “continue with the America First approach”.

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South-east Asia

No one candidate ticks all the boxes

Raul Dancel
Philippines Correspondent
In Manila

It is not as clear as day who will be better for South-east Asia: Mr Donald Trump or Mr Joe Biden.

“There are upsides and downsides,” said research fellow Lucio Pilo III at the Asia-Pacific Pathways to Progress Foundation.

If Mr Trump is re-elected, he will likely continue his transactional, go-it-alone way of dealing with both allies and adversaries, with rancour and unpredictability.

Dr Dinna Prapto Raharja, an Indonesian expert on international relations, said: “Everyone, including Indonesia, must anticipate his erratic actions, his unplanned actions that are based on his wishes to win at all costs.”

Dr Dinna Prapto Raharja, an expert on international relations, on Mr Donald Trump.

“This is not entirely a bad thing for the region, especially for nations with enough leverage to wrangle good terms, like Vietnam, which can provide sanctuary for US firms fleeing China and be a counterbalance to Beijing’s ambitions as the superpower in Asia.”

Mr Trump is also not keen on interfering in the domestic affairs of other nations, which will be comforting for stronger such as the Philippines. Prayut Chan-o-cha and Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte.

“Trump will be better for the cur-



The USS Nimitz aircraft carrier in the South China Sea in July. The US has rejected most of China’s claims to contested waters there. PHOTO: REUTERS

ANTICIPATE ERRATIC ACTIONS

Everyone, including Indonesia, must anticipate his erratic actions, his unplanned actions that are based on his wishes to win at all costs.



DR DINNA PRAPTO RAHARJA, an expert on international relations, on Mr Donald Trump.

rent (Thai) regime due to his pragmatism and ignorance of domestic issues anywhere in the world.”

Mr Biden is expected to bring to the table what the region sorely needs – a return to multilateralism.

That may, among other things, mean the US will rejoin the Trans-Pacific Partnership pact, which will be a boon for Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei and Vietnam, as the world tries to recover from Covid-19’s financial impact.

But Mr Biden is also likely to fo-

cus on human rights, and create a tailwind for pro-democracy movements in the region. That will ruffle feathers in Thailand, the Philippines, Vietnam and Myanmar, where governance and civil liberties form a complicated mix.

As for regional security, both men will not significantly alter the dynamics, which are dictated in large part by the rivalry between the US and China to be the dominant force in the region. Asean will have to continue navigating a thin middle ground and enhance its defence ties with the US without inviting reprisals from Beijing.

As for dealing with the pandemic, Mr Pilo said: “The dominant force in the region, Asean will have to continue navigating a thin middle ground and enhance its defence ties with the US without inviting reprisals from Beijing.”

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Additional reporting by Tan Tam Mei in Singapore and Wahyudi Soeriaatmadja in Jakarta

India

Cosy ties, no matter who is in Oval Office

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In New Delhi

In February, when President Donald Trump visited India, Prime Minister Narendra Modi was effusive in his praise for the United States leader at a massive rally in Gujarat, the home state of the Indian PM.

He said ties were “far greater and closer”, and praised Mr Trump as a leader “who thinks big”.

The camaraderie between the two men indicated the comfort level in the relationship between the two sides, something with rare bipartisan support in the US where Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden is also a proponent of close ties with New Delhi.

There is a sense here, therefore, that India has managed to successfully navigate the choppy waters of political Washington, where an administration led by an unpredictable and volatile president has even taken aim at close allies.

“I think this is a simple matter, by and large, of how India has adjusted now to Mr Trump. Any change in government will be a bit destabilising in the short term,” said Professor Harsh V. Pant, director of studies at the Observer Research Foundation in New Delhi.

“I don’t think there is any particular proclivity for Mr Trump. I think



A poster in New Delhi depicting portraits of Indian soldiers killed during a border clash with Chinese troops in June. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

MANAGING TRUMP

I don’t think there is any particular proclivity for Mr Trump. I think it’s a question that he has been managed well by India. There is a level of confidence that if he is re-elected, he can be managed.



PROFESSOR HARSH V. PANT, director of studies at the Observer Research Foundation in New Delhi.

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Mr Trump’s tough rhetoric against Pakistan and China has been of particular comfort to India, which has a troubled relationship with both.

India has thrown off all hesitation in closely aligning with the US, a shift further solidified by the worst border clashes in more than

four decades with China in June.

This shift was also apparent in the decision to invite Australia – after years of hesitation – to join the Malabar naval exercises, involving Japan and the US. All four countries are members of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, an informal security forum seen by China as an adversarial grouping.

Still, there are contentious issues between India and the US which include trade as well as Mr Trump’s decision to tighten the visa programme for highly skilled workers, used mostly by Indian software companies.

Indian analysts do not foresee a Biden presidency altering the upward trajectory of close ties, given the convergence of interests over China.

Mr Biden is expected to be more lenient on immigration. New Delhi, however, will be wary of him focusing on India’s internal developments, including human rights and Kashmir, an area largely ignored by Mr Trump.

By and large, South Asia is expected continuity, analysts said.

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