



The Biden administration: The road ahead for Asia

As a new US president takes charge, the journey onwards will be radically different in parts, but it will also have to navigate paths carved out by the Trump administration



Tommy Koh

For *The Straits Times*

United States President Joe Biden is an old friend of Singapore, Asean and Asia. He knows this region well and has a personal relationship with many of its leaders. His eight years as the US vice-president and the many more years as a member of the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee have prepared him well for his new responsibility.

The appointment of such experienced and respected individuals as Mr Antony Blinken, Mr Kurt Campbell, Mr John Kerry and Mr Jake Sullivan to high positions in his administration has been well received.

After the chaos of the last four years, Asians can expect the Biden administration to be rational, predictable and competent.

CONTINUITY

There will be both continuity and change in US policy towards the region.

I expect the following policies of the Trump administration to be continued by the Biden administration.

First, the US will remain the dominant military power in the Indo-Pacific, with the US Navy's Seventh Fleet based in Japan and US troops in South Korea and Australia.

Second, the US will build ever closer relations with India and Vietnam.

Third, the US will encourage its

private sector to compete more vigorously with China, in the region, in trade, investment, infrastructure building, human capital development and other areas.

Fourth, the US will continue with its freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea.

CHANGE

The Biden administration will depart from the Trump administration in some important areas. These changes will be welcomed by Asia.

First, the US will return to the Paris Agreement on climate change.

Second, the US will return to the World Health Organisation (WHO).

Third, the US will cease its campaign against multilateralism and multilateral institutions.

Fourth, the US will return to its traditional position of supporting free trade and globalisation, rolling back economic policies that, among other things, leaned on punitive tariffs that alienated both friends and foes without achieving its desired domestic goals.

Fifth, the US will support the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals.

ASEAN AND SOUTH-EAST ASIA

I think the Biden administration will understand that South-east Asia is the principal region in which the US and China are competing for influence. This realisation will elevate the importance of South-east Asia and Asean in US policy.

I therefore expect the Biden administration to do the following: First, I expect President Biden to hold an annual summit with the leaders of Asean.

Second, I expect President Biden or Vice-President Kamala Harris to attend the annual Asean summit and related summits. In Asia, relationships matter and turning up is a show of respect. In the past four years, Mr Donald Trump attended only one Asean summit.

Third, I expect the Biden administration to respect Asean's aspiration to maintain its unity, centrality and independence. This is important because Asean does

not wish to be pressured by the great powers to take sides.

Fourth, I hope that the Biden administration will seriously consider rejoining the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, which, in its original form (Trans-Pacific Partnership), was a landmark achievement of the Obama administration. Trade is strategy and the US cannot afford not to be part of this important regional economic architecture.

JAPAN, AUSTRALIA, INDIA

Japan and Australia are treaty allies of the US. India is not.

However, the US, Japan, Australia and India have one thing in common: They all perceive the rise of China with concern.

They have, therefore, come together in a grouping called the Quad. The stability of the Quad depends on Australia. If there is a change of government in Australia, the Labor government may withdraw from the Quad, as it did once before.

The Biden administration has said that it intends to unite the democratic countries against China. I don't think this is an achievable objective since many democratic countries, such as South Korea and New Zealand, want to be on good terms with China.

There are very few countries in Asia, democratic or otherwise, that are willing to join a US-led coalition against China.

NORTH KOREA

President Biden will not follow Mr Trump's precedent on dealing with North Korea. I don't think there will be a third US-North Korea summit after the first in Singapore (2018) and the second in Vietnam (2019).

The Biden team should realise that North Korea will not give up its nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles, because they guarantee the regime's survival.

The unpleasant truth is that countries that have acquired nuclear weapons will not give them up. The question is, what does Chairman Kim Jong Un want in return for giving up his nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles?

CHINA

What will be President Biden's policy towards China? Although only four years have passed since the end of the Obama administration, there has been a paradigm change in US attitude towards China.

During the Obama administration, the US saw China as a friend and a competitor. Today, the US perceives China as a strategic competitor and an adversary. I don't think this legacy of the Trump administration will change.

The Trump administration had launched a Cold War against China. Under Mr Biden, the Cold War will become a Cold Peace. The difference is that, in a Cold Peace, while the relationship remains adversarial in nature, it is not always a zero-sum game.

Shorn of the incendiary anti-communist rhetoric of the Trump era, the Biden team will focus on: (a) preventing China from catching up with the US

President Joe Biden wants America to lead the world again. His first priority should be to lead the world through the WHO, to defeat Covid-19. Apart from inoculating the American people, he should help the poorer countries to acquire the vaccines for their people. The truth is that Americans will not be safe unless the people of the Third World are safe.

militarily, (b) preventing China from dominating East Asia, (c) preventing China from turning the South China Sea into a Chinese lake, and (d) changing the world's perception of America as a declining superpower and a dysfunctional democracy.

HOW TO LEAD THE WORLD

Since the end of World War II, the US had been the leader of the world. This leadership role ended with Mr Trump, who had no interest in playing such a role. He had felt that the world had taken advantage of the generosity of the US. He wanted to redress that and pursued policies supposedly designed to "Make America Great Again". His vision of America was as a colossus, dominating the rest of the world; there was no room for multilateralism, while bilateral relations, even with longstanding allies, were viewed through a transactionalist lens.

President Biden wants America to lead the world again. His first priority should be to lead the world through the WHO, to defeat Covid-19. Apart from inoculating the American people, he should help the poorer countries to acquire the vaccines for their people. The truth is that Americans will not be safe unless the people of the Third World are safe.

President Biden's second priority should be to help the world economy recover from the current recession. The process of rebuilding the national economies and creating jobs will take time and resources. The US should mobilise the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and other development banks in a concerted effort to revitalise growth. It is also important that we should build back better and in a more sustainable way. Mr Biden's nominee for US Treasury Secretary, Dr Janet Yellen, understands the challenge and has the ability to deliver the solutions.

President Biden's third priority should be to lead the world, through the UN, to combat climate change, the mass extinction of species and the degradation of the world's oceans. I am glad that he has put Mr Kerry in charge of this agenda. Mr Kerry had played a decisive role in the success of the Paris conference on climate change.

There is very little time left for humanity to change the way in which it has used the earth's resources and its ecosystems. If we do not make a paradigm change in our mindset, our policies and our actions, we may eventually make the planet uninhabitable.

stopinion@sph.com.sg

• Tommy Koh served as Singapore's ambassador to the US from 1984 to 1990 and is chairman of the Centre for International Law at the National University of Singapore.