

« L'enjeu porté par les lendemains de la séquence électorale haletante que traversent les Etats-Unis et qui, même si elle est supposée se clore de façon décisive sur la base d'éléments tangibles bientôt disponibles, pourrait se prolonger, nous a conduits, en tant que "think-tank" forcément conscient du poids de cette élection dans l'avenir immédiat des relations inter-asiatiques et des risques concentrés dans la région, à un exercice que nous avons souhaité documenter aussi systématiquement que possible. Il est naturellement périlleux, ou alors il peut paraître extrêmement inconséquent, de tenter un exercice de "politique-fiction" conduisant à des schémas qui pourraient être qualifiés d'irréalistes. Il nous a cependant semblé intéressant de pousser les raisonnements permettant de construire des scénarios et de tester leurs limites parce que, même si les dynamiques évoquées ici en s'abstenant de toute censure intellectuelle tout autant que de pensée fantaisiste ne sont pas conduites jusqu'à leur terme, les directions empruntées resteront comme des choix et des "cartes" potentiellement mobilisées par les acteurs-clés de cette région plus que jamais stratégique pour le restant du siècle. »

Jean-François Di Meglio, Président d'Asia Centre, et l'équipe d'Asia Centre

## **Asia's Response to A Dual U.S. Presidential Model and Civil Strife at the Dawn of the Turbulent Twenties**

Hadrien T. Saperstein

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*Abstract: Taking a twilight zone approach to political risk analysis, the article forecasts four scenarios regarding Asia's political response to an extended, hotly contested presidential transition period and beyond, whether in the court system or otherwise, between the two candidates. The most likely scenario is that certain great and medium-power countries augment the total number and intensity of grey-zone operations to pursue political, strategic and operational ends in the Indo-Pacific region without actually resorting to open-conflict. Faced with a new strategic environment, small-to-medium states in the Indo-Pacific region, especially in the Southeast Asia sub-region, adopt a dual policy of showing the United States that they remain committed to the standing security arrangement while it prioritizes its constitutional crisis and civil strife, but, also, simultaneously hedge to better position themselves with other states. The article also describes the politico-strategic implications for U.S. foreign policy towards the Indo-Pacific region after the extended contestation period for the presidency in the medium-to-long term risk horizon. It finds that the contestation period after the 2020 U.S. presidential election is indeed the fire starter for the turbulent twenties and the ensuing cyclical domestic crises ultimately engenders a relative strategic shift in the Indo-Pacific region: more ambitious great and middle-power actors advancing against weakened democratic partners and allies amid an accelerating "third reverse wave" of democratization.*

### **Introduction**

« Comment cela s'appelle-t-il, quand le jour se lève, comme aujourd'hui, et que tout est gâché, que tout est saccagé, et que l'air pourtant se respire, et qu'on a tout perdu, que la ville brûle, que les innocents s'entre-tuent,

mais que les coupables agonisent, dans un coin du jour qui se lève ? - Cela a un très beau nom, femme Narsès. Cela s'appelle l'aurore. »

-- Électre de Jean Giraudoux, 1937

To find the last time the United States of America (U.S.) witnessed such levels of contestation for the presidency one must travel back to the 1876 presidential election, when Democrat Samuel Tilden and Republican Rutherford B. Hayes shared a co-presidential status for a short period of time.<sup>1</sup> Amid the contest, four states sent rival slates of electors to the Electoral College, the body constitutionally charged with choosing the president. The resulting deadlock only broke through a bargain, “when Tilden agreed to step aside in exchange for a fateful deal to pull federal troops out of the South and abandon the protection of recently freed slaves.”<sup>2</sup>

On the 6th of January 2020, Eurasia Group, a renown political risk consultancy firm, had already forecasted that the November presidential election between U.S. President Donald J. Trump and the future nominee for the Democratic Party – now former Vice-President Joseph “Joe” Robinette Biden Jr. – held the top risk for the year.<sup>3</sup> On the 3rd of August 2020, the Transition Integrity Project wargamed this forecast by convening a bipartisan group of one hundred current and former senior government and campaign leaders along with other experts. The report reaffirmed the previous forecast in that there was indeed a high-degree of likelihood that the presidential election will “be marked by a chaotic legal and political landscape with President Trump likely to contest the result by both legal and extra-legal means, in an attempt to hold onto power.”<sup>4</sup> More importantly, the post-exercise report found that “the potential for violent conflict is high, particularly since Trump encourages his supporters to take up arms.”<sup>5</sup> Others were likewise pessimistic about the turn of events during the contestation period for the presidency. The famed counterinsurgency expert, David Kilcullen, argues that America is already in a state of “incipient insurgency”<sup>6</sup> that has the potential to turn into a full-fledged insurgency with the right triggers.<sup>7</sup>

The concerns are not merely for the short-to-medium term, but, also, the medium-to-long term risk horizon. Peter Turchin, an evolutionary anthropologist from the University of Connecticut, and Jack Goldstone, a sociologist from George Mason University, argue that the political stress indicator – a statistical model that connects inequality with political instability – foresees dire problems regardless of the outcome in the presidential race; for, the U.S. is at the “precipice of a second Civil War amid rising inequality and social division... [whereas] the 2020 election is the potential ‘fire-starter’ event” for the ensuing “turbulent twenties.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Alex Kilment, “Why a Disputed US Election in 2020 Would be Worse than in 2000,” *Eurasia Group GZERO Media*, Sep. 01, 2020. The 2020 presidential election cycle cannot equate the Bush vs. Gore contestation period for five reasons: polarization is higher now before, the stakes are more dramatic, trust is lower, social media holds a greater presence, the socio-political context is dramatically different considering an active pandemic and looming global economic depression.

<sup>2</sup> Staff, “The U.S. Presidential Election: Managing Risk Violence,” *Crisis Group Report* no. 4, Oct. 28, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Ian Bremmer and Cliff Kupchan, “Risk 1: Rigged! Who Governs the US?,” *Eurasia Group*, Jan. 6, 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Staff, “Preventing a Disrupted Presidential Election and Transition,” *Transition Integrity Project*, Aug. 23, 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Zack Beauchamp, “How to Avert a Post-Election Nightmare,” *Vox*, Aug. 18, 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Fred Kaplan, “Is America in the Early Stages of Armed Insurgency?,” *Slate*, Sep. 08, 2020. The U.S. Central Intelligence Agency defines an “incipient insurgency” as “inchoate actions by a range of groups — followed by organizing, training, acquisition of resources (including arms), and the buildup of public support — lead to increasingly frequent incidents of violence, reflecting “improved organization and forethought.”

<sup>7</sup> David Kilcullen, “America in 2020, ‘Insurrection’ or ‘Incipient Insurgency?’,” *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, Jun. 23, 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Frank Chung, “US Election: America on a Brink of Civil War?,” *New Zealand Herald*, Nov. 1, 2020.

With concerning triggers in the extended presidential transition period and beyond, this article does not analyse Asia's political response to either President Donald J. Trump or former Vice-President Joe Biden's projected policies for the Indo-Pacific region after a decisive electoral victory and smooth transition period, as many others analysts have written *ad nauseum* over the last several weeks in numerous newspaper and magazine articles.<sup>9</sup> Rather, under a twilight zone approach to political risk analysis, this article forecasts Asia's political response during an extended, hotly contested presidential transition period, whether in the court system or otherwise, between the two presidential candidates (further details below). It also describes the politico-strategic implications for U.S. foreign policy towards the Indo-Pacific region after the extended contestation period creates an informal co-presidential model in the medium-to-long term risk horizon.

### **Sex Pistols, Anarchy in The ~~U.K.~~ U.S.**

The following theoretical fire starter to the turbulent twenties is partly inspired from a new book penned by Lawrence Douglas, law professor at Amherst College, released on the 19th of May, 2020:

“[The] Election Day takes place in the middle of a second wave of coronavirus infections, turnout is historically low and a huge number of votes are cast via absentee ballot. While Biden is the presumptive winner, the electoral process was bumpy, with thousands of mail-in votes in closely fought states still waiting to be counted. Trump, naturally, refuses to concede and spends election night tweeting about how “fraudulent” the vote was. One day goes by, then a few more, and a month later Trump is still contesting the outcome, calling it “rigged” or a “Deep State plot” or whatever. Republicans, for the most part, are falling in line behind Trump. From that point forward, we’re officially in a constitutional crisis.”<sup>10</sup>

Unlike in previous contested presidential elections and other constitutional crises the two candidates do not swiftly agree to a settled bargain seeing that both camps delegitimize the election results during their presidential campaigns and the degree of polarization between the two electoral camps is at its widest since the days prior to the U.S. Civil War (1861-65).<sup>11</sup> The polarization leads to a dual U.S. presidential model starting around mid-November beyond the 8th of December, 2020 or the 6th of January, 2021, or even perhaps after the 20th of January, 2021, – while the former is the date for the Electoral College vote, the latter is the date for the Congressional vote and the latest is the presidential inauguration date – as the presidential election results are still being contested in the court system. President Trump still gives no indication that he intends to step down for any of the three dates under

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<sup>9</sup> Alex Fang and Marrian Zhou, “What Would a Biden Presidency mean for Asia?,” *Nikkei Asia*, Oct. 20, 2020; Yukari Easton, “While America Decides, America’s Allies Wait,” *The Diplomat*, Aug. 20, 2020; Sebastian Strangio, “What Would a Biden Administration Mean for Southeast Asia?,” *The Diplomat*, Nov. 03, 2020; James Kraska, “What Will an Indo-Pacific Strategy Look Under Biden?,” *9DashLine*, Oct. 12, 2020; Christian Whiton, “What a Second Trump Term Would Mean for Asia,” *The National Interest*, Oct. 5, 2020; Bhavan Jaipragas, “Donald Trump or Joe Biden? What Will Change for ASEAN After the US Election?,” *South China Morning Post*, Sep. 21, 2020.

<sup>10</sup> Lawrence Douglas, *Will He go? Trump and the Looming Election Meltdown in 2020* (New York: Twelve, 2020); Sean Illing, “Will he go? A law professor fears a meltdown this November,” *Vox*, Jun. 03, 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Mary Dejevsky, “No the United States isn’t on the verge of civil war,” *The Spectator*, Nov. 02, 2020.

the pretext that the courts remain in deliberation. The ambiguity about Trump's role after the transition period begets a mass pro-democracy movement (represented by both sides of the political spectrum) and "islands of [in]civility"<sup>12</sup> spreading rapidly across the whole country. The combination of mass civil protests turning into riots with intermittent assassinations and small-scale shootouts between vying factions (e.g. Antifa vs. Boogaloo or Proud Boys), like in Italy during the 1970s, drives President Trump to send the federal government forces into large metropolitans. A close advisor to Trump is quoted, "even if Trump 'officially' steps down from the presidency, he will remain the President for almost half of the voters in this country."

### **Short-to-Medium Term Risk Horizon**

The article offers four scenarios for Asia's political response to an extended contestation period after the 2020 U.S. presidential election day. The scenarios are listed from the highest-degree to lowest-degree of likelihood.

#### *Scenario 1: Hedging Against Enhanced Grey-Zone Operations (45%)*

Between the constitutional crisis and civil strife, certain great-power and medium-power countries augment the number and intensity of grey-zone operations to pursue political, strategic and operational ends in the Indo-Pacific region without actually resorting to open-conflict. Most notably, Russia (i.e. use of newly acquired naval ships by the Pacific Fleet to replicate China's three stage process in the Senkaku Islands dispute with the Kuril Islands dispute),<sup>13</sup> China (e.g. record breaking number of Chinese naval ships around Senkaku Islands, 2020)<sup>14</sup> and North Korea<sup>15</sup> enhance the quantity and intensity of their grey-zone operations on their maritime and land frontiers, as they all recognize that the United States Armed Forces are still a formidable adversary that cannot yet be taken head-on. Now facing a growing total number and intensity of grey-zone operations, small-to-medium states in the Indo-Pacific region, especially in the Southeast Asia sub-region, start the process to think beyond their overall security relationship with the United States, as they first and foremost seek reliability; albeit, without actually deciding to deconstruct any standing security arrangements or construct other security arrangements with other states. Small-to-medium countries in the Indo-Pacific region adopt a dual policy of showing the United States that they remain committed to the standing security arrangement while it prioritizes its constitutional crisis and civil strife, but, also, simultaneously hedge to better position themselves with other states, like European great and middle-power countries. Similar to Australia, Southeast Asian states are divided on the best manner to approach the relative strategic shift in the Sino-American relationship. While some look cautiously outside (e.g. European Union, France, United Kingdom, India), others look closer to home inside the Indo-Pacific region (e.g. Japan, Australia).

#### *Scenario 2: Hard Balancing Against Authoritarian Realpolitik (35%)*

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<sup>12</sup> Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012).

<sup>13</sup> Alessio Patalano, "What is China's Strategy in Senkaku Islands?," *War on the Rocks*, Sep. 10, 2020.

<sup>14</sup> Grant Newsham, "China, Japan Island Dispute in New Sharper Focus," *Asia Times*, Aug. 03, 2020.

<sup>15</sup> Ian Bowers, "The Use and Utility of Hybrid Warfare on the Korean Peninsula," *The Pacific Review* vol. 31, no. 6 (2018): 762-786.

Authoritarian regimes and leaders in the Indo-Pacific region initially give a grace period for the United States to manage its constitutional crisis and civil strife still believing the country will find its footing. Yet, Trump's authoritarian tendencies in response to the constitutional crisis and civil strife vindicates the position taken by authoritarian leaders that the democratic model holds many downsides in the face of Russia's application of information warfare and the Covid-19 pandemic. Inspired by Russia, China and North Korea augment their informational warfare focus in the Indo-Pacific region to indirectly weaken the United States, showing that the inherent flaws in democratic system are the cause for the accelerating decline on the global stage. Some democratic leaders begin to accept the narrative of an absolute United States decline in China's 21st century rise. As a result, authoritarian regimes and leaders become emboldened amid this strategic shift seeing an opportunity to effect some harsher policies without receiving political repercussions. North Korea augments nuclear testing totals with a particular focus on submarine-launched ballistic missiles. This emboldenment also accelerates further the "reverse wave" of democratization in the Indo-Pacific region, already started by the Covid-19 crisis, as authoritarian leaders quash pro-democratic elements in their respective countries and search for domestic politico-strategic opportunities to exploit to their advantage. Considering that the dual presidential model endures for some time with no clear end, many leaders with authoritarian tendencies phone Trump in order to undermine the Biden administration and/or boost their own domestic image as strongman figures. In Thailand, ultra-royalists in the government, police and palace use information warfare to demonize the non-Thai democratic model in order to justify an aggressive push against pro-democracy protesters. While the United States and Europe remain quiet on the issue, China takes this opening to reinforce its economic and political charm offensive by demonstrating that it is a stable partner that can be trusted. In Indonesia and Malaysia, democratization efforts take a beating, too. The democracies in Northeast Asia, South Korea, Taiwan and Japan are likewise isolated while authoritarian regimes continue to gain confidence. These lasting democracies are less and less able to promote their normative values in their neighboring environment, leading to realpolitik: Asian democracies are now required to make deals with authoritarian regimes within trade, politics and so on, as they do not feel another real choice is present anymore. In a last effort, Asian democracies choose to reshape their respective security architecture beyond the United States, towards European great-power countries and like-minded partners. This hard (re)balancing effort creates new security architecture in the Indo-Pacific region like a Quadrilateral Security Dialogue 2.5: expanded to include new members (i.e. United Kingdom, France, Indonesia, etc.).

*Scenario 3: "Wait and See" Holding Pattern (15%)*

Great and middle-power countries in Asia wait patiently to see the official winner of the election even with civil strife escalating unevenly across the country. Respective country leaders are reluctant to make any public announcement of support in fear of political retaliation or repercussions from either of the two presidential candidates. This reticence manifests a relative freeze in the region with regards to behaviors and actions. In that environment, great and middle-power countries do not attempt to take strategic and operational advantages. Russia and China are noticeably quiet during this period believing that the United States is doing much of the work for them in terms of information warfare, as international confidence in American democracy is further eroding with each passing day. None of the seventeen U.S. intelligence services announce that either are employing cyber-attacks and information warfare (e.g. propaganda) excepting the traditional attacks on the private sector for intellectual property. On the Chinese side, the "wait and see" policy is enacted in consequence of the negative backlash received during its "wolf warrior" diplomacy period. Chinese Premier Xi Jinping remains interested to know the results for the U.S. presidency seeing that he wants to continue the Sino-American trade negotiations to remove any large thorns (grey swans) from threatening the

implementation of the newly introduced 14th Five-year economic plan (2021-2025). Taking this time to focus on internal affairs, China does not invade or make aggressive progress towards Japan's Senkaku islands, India's border or Taiwan's proto-independence, with no sudden increase in manned personnel and naval or air assets. Taiwan is patient believing that, although Trump is the preferred choice, both candidates will enforce the armament sales agreement and the Taipei Act (2019). Therefore, President Tsai Ing-Wen does not read into the U.S. constitutional crisis and civil strife as a sign to begin hedging or balancing towards other great-powers for its security guarantee. Seeing that China does not take this opportunity to perform authoritarian acts like further tightening of civil rights policies in Hong Kong, authoritarian leaders in the Southeast Asia sub-region also do not step out of line. Although the Thai government and the palace does not necessarily prefer a President Biden administration considering that its manifesto speaks substantially about enforcing human rights, they patiently wait for the results in fear of any political repercussions similar to the early days in the post-2014 coup environment. The Thai government is hopeful that there will be a reluctance by a President Biden administration to push for democratization, as he will play it safe for the foreseeable future. Nonetheless, the fear of future repercussions limits the government's policy response options accordingly helping prolong the pro-democracy protest movement in Thailand. Other authoritarian countries in Southeast Asia follow the same course of action as China and Thailand with their management of any protest movement. In turn, Australia is eager for the results but awaits patiently. Although Prime Minister Scott Morrison prefers a President Biden administration, the latter's use of multilateralism acting as a conduit for Australia's strength in the region, it also does not want to face the potential political repercussions from a President Trump administration like it faced during the refugee settlement debates in 2017. South Korea is also eager for the results of the presidential election to be declared: the two countries are amid payment re-negotiations for the presence of soldiers, sailors, marines and airmen based on its territory. Although the South Korean military is especially weary of North Korean aggression during this period, they are aware that the traditional aggressive behaviours and threats around the U.S. presidential election usually arrive several weeks to months after the new president transitions into office. Like the others, Japan does not take a position before the winner is announced, as it is among the countries that most respects diplomatic norms. As Chinese officials are not keen to step out of bounds and remain relatively restrained, the Japanese defense forces do not increase their military and naval activities around the Senkaku Islands. India is patient for the results, too, as both candidates are to its benefits. Although Modi favours Trump (stated in an official speech, despite the diplomatic norms), due to the personal relationship between the leaders and lack of pressure on human rights enforcement by the President Trump administration, he would accept a President Biden administration seeing that the low-level trade war might finally end and the soon-to-arrive withdrawal from Afghanistan – a security issue for India – becomes an inclusive multilateral process rather than an exclusive unilateral process. Moreover, former Vice-President Biden has historically shown himself to support India as a strategic counter-balance to China.

*Scenario 4: Legion, "Cuneum Formate" (5%)*

The announcement of a wave of retaliation attacks through mass-shootings and images of federal forces debarking onto the streets compels great and middle-power countries in the Indo-Pacific region to believe that the United States's terminal decline is imminent even under the condition that a belated "rally around the flag" movement occurs. Seeing a sharp strategic shift in the Indo-Pacific region, some states immediately begin to search for politico-strategic opportunities to exploit to their advantage. Coupled with increasing use of cyber-attacks to weaken response times, China makes the initial move to send some reinforcements to its land border with India and/or deploy naval ships to some of its desired ends on its maritime frontier: Japan's Senkaku Islands, South Korea's Socotra

Rocks, Indonesia's Natuna Sea deep-sea mining rights, Vietnam's Exclusive Economic Zones in the South China Sea, or Taiwan's proto-independence stance. Inspired by Russia's successful use of information warfare in two consecutive presidential elections and China's new operational moves, North Korea also becomes more assertive by moving up its traditionally-held quadrennial application of threats and aggressive behaviour in the post-U.S. presidential election period: increase use of cyber-attacks against developed economies for profit-seeking enterprises, deployment of subversive assets in the disputed maritime areas with South Korea, and nuclear testing in both its near-seas and far-seas. Also seeing this strategic shift in the Indo-Pacific region, Russia becomes more assertive with its dispute over the Kuril Islands with Japan by sending forward some of the newly deployed multi-role fighters and constructed bombers and naval assets in its Pacific Fleet. On their side, India, Japan, South Korea, Indonesia, Vietnam and Taiwan want to show that they are able to operate even while the United States's focus is directed towards domestic rather than foreign affairs. Each country deploys a variety of military and naval assets in response. In turn, the United States armed forces respond aggressively to the numerous attacks in an attempt to show that a strategic shift has not actually occurred, still able to provide security guarantees to its allies and partners and defend its interests across the region. The U.S. Navy decides to deploy a minimum of three aircraft carriers in the region (i.e. the North Korean nuclear crisis, 2017) for some time in an effort to show its commitment to the region. However, the increasing number of ships and aircraft in such a small geographic space causes an accidental collision between any of the two aggressive actors. Rather than cooler heads prevailing like in the previous military and naval collisions (i.e. Hainan Island Incident, 2001), the collision is used as a pretext to quickly escalate tensions in order to achieve strategic-political ends. This ultimately creates a division inside the region between three forces: states taking one side or the other (e.g. Australia vs. Cambodia) and the remaining small-to-medium power countries (e.g. Singapore, Thailand, etc.) attempting to stay out of the war entirely in order to seize the available politico-strategic bread crumbs from any of the conflicts.

## **A Wavering Rome**

In time there will be little doubt that the contestation period after the 2020 U.S. presidential election was the fire starter for the ensuing turbulent twenties; for, irregardless of the winner at the end of this contestation period, the next decade for its domestic politics will look more or less like the past four years under the Trump administration.

Any hope prior to the presidential election that a "Blue-wave" would generate a decisive victory by the Biden campaign and allow some members in the top echelons of the Republican Party to reform its image and direction, reversing and removing some of the most worrying trendlines and triggers (e.g. political and income inequality), are now unlikely to follow. The remaining moderates in the Republican Party are muted by the fact that President Trump lost in a close election and not a landslide. There is also the underlying fear that a mass exodus into a third party might occur under the context that any serious reforms are considered, inducing an acquiescence from Republican Party authorities towards an unchecked President Trump informally representing them during the Biden presidency. The lack of internal reforms will prompt the Republican Senators and Representatives to weaponize the exceptional voter fraud cases in an endeavour to delegitimize the Biden administration. This policy mirrors the efforts by the Democratic Party to delegitimize the Trump administration through an impeachment process due to collusion attempts with Russian authorities during the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign. This will require President Biden to quickly utilize most of the scant political capital gained from the presidential election. This new political space with one formal

president and one informal president will likely permit Trump to run for re-election in the 2024 U.S. presidential election seeing that no other candidate in the Republican Party will be able to mobilize the same total amount of votes in the Republican primaries. While age and health was a concern in previous and current presidential elections, the “Donald” would still be younger than President Biden on *his* first day in office. Of note, the U.S. constitution does not prevent former presidents from running for office at a later time (e.g. Grover Cleveland: 22nd and 24th President of the United States of America).

As Council on Foreign Relations President Richard Haass wrote recently, “whatever the ultimate outcome of this election, this is a deeply divided country along political and cultural lines alike. Bodes badly for governing at home and for building a consensus as to the country’s role in the world.”<sup>16</sup> In that line of thought, irregardless of the winner for the current and future presidential elections, no American president will thwart the cyclical domestic turmoil from weakening the United States’s place on the global stage.<sup>17</sup> The *perceived* absolute (relative) decline of the United States in the Indo-pacific region precipitates, at the very best, a relative strategic shift in the Indo-Pacific region: more ambitious great and middle-power actors<sup>18</sup> advancing against weakened democratic partners and allies amid an accelerating “third reverse wave” of democratization.<sup>19</sup>

The relative decline will be further exacerbated by a continuous paucity of funding for the U.S. diplomatic corps in consecutive fiscal budgets, making it even more arduous to achieve its desired ends in the Indo-Pacific region in contrast to previous years. Case in point: The United States’s “vaccine diplomacy” in the Covid-19 period. As stated by Aaron Connelly from the International Institute for Strategic Studies think tank, “the United States has ceded the field to China in terms of bilateral vaccine deals in south-east Asia.”<sup>20</sup> As it were, most countries in Southeast Asia have already found suppliers other than the United States for their vaccine demands: Cambodia and Laos naturally went with China, but, more surprisingly, Vietnam, Indonesia and Philippines went with China, too. Although Singapore, Japan and Malaysia did favour the United States’s vaccine diplomacy, Indonesia and Thailand forewent that option to go with the United Kingdom. Nevertheless, the Chinese Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, stated that both Malaysia and Thailand would still remain on their priority list for the Covid-19 vaccine in the hopes that the western vaccine is less effective or western states are unable to successfully roll-out their operations in the region.

Many analysts forecast that President Biden’s multilateral approach will revitalize the United States foreign policy systematically poor showing in the Indo-Pacific region. Meaning, the United States will (re)join a host of international organizations and programs, including the World Health Organization’s Covax initiative -- aims to provide two billion vaccines by the end of next year to under-developed countries. Yet, as these institutions are fundamentally undergirded by the United States’s protection and visual standing, they are gravely further weakened with each passing domestic crisis. Therefore, the Biden administration’s projected “no frill” or “business almost as usual” approach (mimicking the

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<sup>16</sup> Abhijnan Rej, “What Lies Ahead for U.S. Foreign Policy After the Elections?,” *The Diplomat*, Nov. 4, 2020.

<sup>17</sup> Rita Trichur, “It’s Time for the G20 to Show Some Leadership on Global Recovery,” *The Globe and Mail*, Nov. 02, 2020.

<sup>18</sup> Shannon Tiezzi, “Regardless of U.S. Election Result, China Sees Itself as the Ultimate Winner,” *The Diplomat*, Nov. 03, 2020.

<sup>19</sup> Larry Diamond, “Democratic Regression in Comparative Perspective: Scope, Methods, and Causes,” *Democratization*, (July 2020): 1-21.

<sup>20</sup> Christian Shepherd, Stephanie Findlay and Stefania Palma, “China’s Covid-19 Vaccine Diplomacy Steals a March on the United States,” *Financial Times*, Oct. 21, 2020.



Obama-Clinton era) will be incompatible to this new international environment, with the result that the United States will once again be long on promises, though short on delivery.

With that understanding at-hand, it naturally follows that the United States should rather seek to reform *en masse* standing international global organisations (e.g. Japan or India on the United Nations Security Council) or reimagine entirely new institutions to match the forthcoming new global order and trendlines. But, its domestic issues during the turbulent twenties again seriously hampers the formulation of ambitious (albeit, necessary) strategic moves. Any president that forwards such proposals would face mass repudiation for showing weakness. Whereas in the past American soft power may have been a strength towards aggrandizing the United States's authority abroad it will now have the reverse effect.

Consequently, the United States government will be forced to continue the process of militarizing its foreign policy in order to mitigate the slow-moving strategic shift in the Indo-Pacific region,<sup>21</sup> seeing that the U.S Armed Forces remains one of the few institutions that is viewed domestically with a high-favorability for the foreseeable future.<sup>22</sup> Notwithstanding, the inability to confer ambitious strategic ends and arduousness to project power beyond militarized means due to intermittent domestic crises will make allies and partners far less confident in the longitudinal tenacity and durability of the United States to stay fully committed to the Indo-Pacific region. Although it will not be immediately visible, states in possession of security guarantee arrangements with the United States will ultimately revisit their position through creeping legislation. In the Southeast Asia sub-region, this will consolidate the process already underway over the last couple of years; whereas, small-to-medium mainland states are further constricted by the Chinese political orbit. For instance, Thailand, who sought to balance China through its historical friendship with the United States, will be put in a particularly difficult corner, as the multifaceted Chinese political and economic charm offensives will have almost no opposition or counterweight.

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<sup>21</sup> Rosa Brooks, *How Everything Became War and The Military Became Everything: Tales From the Pentagon* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016); Gordon Adams and Shoon Murray, *Mission Creep: The Militarization of Us Foreign Policy?* (Georgetown: Georgetown University Press, 2014).

<sup>22</sup> Leo Shane III, "Survey: Public Confidence in the Military is High, Especially Amongst the Older Generations," *The Military Times*, Jul. 22, 2019.