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Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA

# A Discussion with Rep. Larry Bucshon M.D. (R-IN)

*Presented by Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA and U.S. Association of Former Members of Congress*

## **Abstract**

*On Tuesday, May 26, 2020, Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA (Sasakawa USA) and the U.S. Association of Former Members of Congress (FMC) welcomed Representative Larry Bucshon M.D. (R-IN) to provide Congress' views of the U.S.-Japan relationship, geopolitics, economics, trade and COVID-19, his experience with the Congressional Study Group on Japan, and a brief forecast on the upcoming elections. FMC Chief Operating Officer, Sabine Schleidt was also present and introduced Rep. Bucshon. Attendees included distinguished guests from the Washington, D.C. policy community, foreign diplomatic corps from the region, academia, think tanks, Japanese businesses, and the Sasakawa Peace Foundation in Tokyo. Sasakawa USA's Chairman and President, Dr. Satohiro Akimoto gave opening remarks and moderated the discussion.*

*Rep. Bucshon was first elected to represent Indiana's 8th district in 2010. Prior to his time in Congress, Rep. Bucshon was a practicing physician and surgeon. He has served on several committees including the Energy and Commerce Committee and the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee. During his time in Congress, he has twice travelled to Japan with the FMC Congressional Study Group on Japan (CSGJ) program. During this discussion, Rep. Bucshon spoke very highly of the program and the opportunities it provides members of Congress to increase their understand of Japan and the importance of the U.S.-Japan relationship.*

## Importance of CSGJ

Rep. Bucshon began the discussion by expressing gratitude for the honor of being named co-chair of CSGJ alongside Representative Diana DeGette (D-CO) and described the goal of CSGJ as educating other members of Congress about our ally Japan. Through CSGJ, members of Congress travel to Japan and learn from the Japanese government and other partners. Rep. Bucshon emphasized the importance of this opportunity by explaining that Congress is in the relationship business. It is very beneficial to have the opportunity to interact with the people they are working with in Japan, both in the government and private sectors. Through CSGJ, members of Congress attain a better understanding of the country, the culture, and the relationship between the U.S. and Japan. During his most recent trip, Rep. Bucshon and the other study members met with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe for 45 minutes. Rep. Bucshon expressed appreciation towards Abe for being so gracious with his time. In addition to the Prime Minister, study members were able to meet with the Governor of Tokyo Yuriko Koike, members of the Diet from different affiliations and parties, and with leaders from the private sector to get a feeling of where the relationship is going.

In addition to these high-level meetings, study members also had the opportunity to see cultural sights around the country, especially in Tokyo and Kyoto. Of course, no trip to Japan is complete without the chance to eat Japanese food and the study members were fortunate to have someone well-versed leading them. Rep. Bucshon explained that Rep. DeGette has a wealth of knowledge and experience in Japan, so as co-chair she ensured the study members were able to eat good Japanese food at their many stops. One new aspect Rep. Bucshon learned about Japan on his most recent trip was the size and success of Japan's whiskey business. The chance to learn something new was a highlight of the trip.

Another aspect of CSGJ is the educational focus. For Rep. Bucshon, it was important to develop an understanding of the history of the region and how Japan has interacted with others in the post-WWII era. These interactions play into all other issues that we see today, especially trade, cultural exchanges, and how our countries interact. His self-study and participation in the study group, has provided him with a deeper, more refined understanding of historical issues and how those play out in the relationship today. The importance of the Asia-Pacific region to the world makes this education even more valuable.

## Rep. Bucshon's View of Asia in Terms of Geopolitics, Economics, Trade, and COVID-19

Asia has always been heavily impactful on the decision-making process in Congress. Although there is almost always consensus on issues relating to Japan, views in Congress on how the U.S. should approach China vary widely. According to Rep. Bucshon, the current mood in Congress with respect to China is cautious. Although the COVID-19 situation has temporarily worsened the relationship between the U.S. and China, Rep. Bucshon feels this is more akin to saber-rattling. Both sides know how important the other is.

Rep. Bucshon explained that he has travelled to China in the past, to Beijing, Shanghai, and Hong Kong. The Hong Kong situation, and similar situation with Taiwan, does present concerns to Rep. Bucshon as he cannot understand why Beijing is taking its current approach and Congress shares this concern. Additionally, the defensive build-up of China is particularly worrisome to Rep. Bucshon and many in Congress. He explained the build-up in China's viewpoint as defensive in nature against the West, but from a U.S. perspective it still does not make sense, as the U.S. has no desire to attack China. The U.S. wants to work with allies, Japan especially, but Rep. Bucshon does not think it is productive for both sides to participate in saber-rattling speech and actions and hopes that we can get past this and back to more constructive discussions.

Rep. Bucshon also touched on Chinese actions in respect to other areas of the globe. Both the U.S. and U.S. allies view the Chinese military build-up in the South China Sea as a cause for concern. Through his travels to South America as well, there is concern about Chinese actions and an unwillingness to play by the rules by bringing in Chinese workers and developing infrastructure for the benefit of China. As a result of these actions and more, Congress is cautious on China.

As a Republican in Congress, Rep. Bucshon shed some light on his party's approach to China. According to Rep. Bucshon, supply-chain related issues, something that Japan is also interested in, have become a major topic of discussion on the hill. Pharmaceutical supply-chains in particular are of interest right now as Beijing has threatened to cut these off. These are, however, complicated discussions that need to happen without resorting to knee-jerk reactions. Rep. Bucshon emphasized how these issues affect all countries, so we need to be aware of how U.S. decisions will affect U.S. allies. He ended this discussion by briefly noting how the rise of India is likely to have a major impact on this issue moving forward and that it may be constructive to look at India more substantially.

## Indiana's Relationship with Japan and China

Indiana benefits heavily from its strong relationship with Japan, both at private and governmental levels. According to Rep. Bucshon, at least 253 Japanese companies are engaged with his state which has led to a substantial manufacturing and supply-chain economy. Governors from Indiana have travelled to Japan for decades to discuss with the Japanese government and private sector how to have better relations with Japan. In his home city of Evansville, the surrounding area is rural and agricultural but also strong in manufacturing due in large part to the presence of Japanese companies. His family has always been a fan of Japanese cars due to this great relationship with Japan and the reliability of Japanese cars. They have driven Lexuses, a Toyota minivan and Highlander, and a Nissan.

Indiana's relationship with Japan is extensive, and although Rep. Bucshon admitted to not having a full data set, the same cannot be said for China. Although there is some aluminum production in northern Indiana, Chinese aluminum companies have put some domestic companies out of business, and the relationship with China is mostly based on supply-chains for rare earth metals such as aluminum. There is no large Chinese business presence but an agricultural relationship with China is extant. Whereas there are largely positive views of Japan in Indiana, Rep. Bucshon explained that the average citizen in Indiana holds similar negative views with the rest of the country on China.

From Rep. Bucshon's perspective, legitimate criticism of China is warranted, especially in terms of how COVID-19 has been handled. People in middle-America, however, do not necessarily have a good understanding of supply-chains and those sorts of relationships. In addition to issues surrounding COVID-19, there is the feeling among average American citizens that jobs have shifted to China, or that China "stole our jobs" so to speak, but that is not really the case. According to Rep. Bucshon, the Chinese are doing a lot of things that many disagree with and government officials from around the world are discussing these issues, but we should not get so far down a tipping point that when we do try to cooperate with China on projects that are mutually beneficial, there is a danger that the U.S. public is totally soured on that relationship. Additionally, the views of U.S. allies should be taken into consideration to prevent harming other U.S. strategies. Rep. Bucshon also noted that the situation with China has also been bad for the treatment of Americans who come from East-Asian backgrounds.

## Importance of Allies, the U.S.-Japan Relationship, and Congressional Perspectives

Rep. Bucshon has now served in Congress for nearly 10 years and during that time perspectives on Japan within Congress have gone only in a positive direction. Having Japanese companies like Subaru, Honda, and Toyota in Indiana and other states to increase U.S. production has been a dramatic benefit to views of Japan across the country. Citizens in Rep. Bucshon's district of Southwest Indiana now have a tremendously positive view of Japan, Japanese people, and Japanese culture and it is continuing in a positive direction. The people of Indiana have many shared values with Japan, such as freedom and opportunity, and by continuing to work alongside Japanese colleagues and friends, understanding of these similarities will endure.

Trade is one aspect where there are differences of opinion in Congress, but overall Congress maintains an overwhelmingly positive view of Japan. Rep. Bucshon noted that he was a supporter of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and was disappointed to see the U.S. pull out of the trade deal, but that efforts to create a bilateral trade deal between the U.S. and Japan have become a good replacement.

Rep. Bucshon was not the only member of Congress disappointed by the decision to pull out of TPP. He and others viewed it as a potential tool for stability in the region, but Japan has been good about keeping TPP countries involved in stability efforts. Instead, the eventual bilateral trade deal with Japan will be good for the U.S. and a stable deal will be critically important as evident by what is happening to soybean producers. TPP would have likely been helpful, but the current administration has no interest in pursuing a multilateral trade deal in the Pacific. From a congressional perspective, both parties have pushed the administration to finalize bilateral agreements, starting with China. Rep. Bucshon also noted that Congress recognizes that the U.S. issues with China and the rest of the world's issues with China are separate. As a result, the U.S. relationship with China should not adversely affect the relationships of U.S. allies and China. The goal of Congress must be to get the administration to take a view on how U.S. actions affect our allies and not just pushing the actions of China. Overall, stability is what is important and Rep. Bucshon views long-term agreements as the best way to make stability happen.

As the environment of the U.S.-China relationship continues its downward spiral, there was concern from an audience member that it would have an impact on expectations of Japanese relations with China, particularly on trade. Rep. Bucshon was quick to console such fears by explaining that there are very few in Congress that would be comfortable putting Japan in a situation to choose

between the U.S. and China, as it would be counterproductive. Additionally, as the world works through supply-chain issues, there are opportunities for the U.S., Japan, and China to cooperate. One example presented by Rep. Bucshon was counterfeit electronic chips. Approximately 10-15% of chips in the world are counterfeit, which increases the risk of accidentally including them in sensitive equipment. Therefore, trustworthy supply-chains must be developed, especially for electronics. This is just one example, but there is a plethora of opportunities for cooperation between the U.S., Japan, and China.

## Congressional Cooperation and Looking Ahead

Many who follow U.S. politics today understand that there is an increase in tensions between the two major parties. Rep. Bucshon, however, expressed optimism and confidence that he and other congressional Republicans can cooperate with congressional Democrats. The two sides disagree on some things but have the potential to work together on a variety of issues. Given that we are in an election year, there might be more politics than normal, but overall it tends not to affect the relationship between the U.S. and its allies or other nations. From a congressional standpoint, party disagreements do not affect the relationship between the U.S. and Japan, so current domestic political tensions are unlikely to have a negative effect on the relationship.

As the discussion neared its conclusion, there were two questions from the audience relating to infrastructure and development. In response, Rep. Bucshon expressed optimism that the U.S. would be able to work with Japanese companies to develop a Japanese style high-speed rail system, with a Dallas to Houston corridor as an easy starter example. A difficulty that the U.S. has in this regard is funding and determining where funds will come from. Rep. Bucshon explained that one major hurdle has been the stagnant rate of the gas tax since 1993, which has negatively impacted the ability of U.S. legislators from pursuing improvements in a variety of areas. Congress must be willing to think outside the box and be transparent about its decision making. Rep. Bucshon used the example of the heavily Republican-led government of Indiana choosing to raise taxes to fund important state-wide infrastructure projects. By explaining the necessity for the tax increase to the people of Indiana, the policy became politically palatable and resulted in a positive outcome for the state.

Finally, the discussion concluded with Rep. Bucshon providing his expectations for the upcoming elections. He explained that the presidential election is likely to be very close and will all come down to how people view the administration's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the decisions of a few

states. The population's opinions on this issue, however, is heavily dependent on which media channel you get your news from. Rep. Bucshon is of the opinion that the administration and Congress have done much better than he initially expected.

Rep. Bucshon also believes that the votes for seats in Congress will also be close but expects his party to flip a seat in Alabama and maintain a seat in Arizona, but overall it will be close. On the House of Representatives side, Rep. Bucshon expects the Republican Party to gain seats.

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*Sasakawa USA is grateful to Rep. Bucshon for participating in this discussion and to FMC and Ms. Schleidt for their partnership.*

*The summarized views of the speakers expressed herein are entirely the work of Sasakawa USA and do not represent the official positions of any of the speakers.*

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