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Issue Brief

Realigning America's Grand Strategy: Biden Will Have His Hands Full

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S*ummary*

Having set an ambitious agenda to reinvigorate US global leadership by pursuing a proactive grand strategy, US President-elect Joseph R. Biden Jr., will, however, have to reckon with the legacy of Trumpism that has made a significant imprint on American foreign policy. Though “a fundamentally different course” has been guaranteed during his campaign, it remains to be seen whether sweeping re-alignments could occur in areas where Trump has caused major disruptions. Closer home, even as the momentum in the India-US strategic partnership is expected to continue, it is worthwhile to note that Biden has proposed rich initiatives to serve the interests of the Indian-American community.

For all his demeanour as a political and diplomatic iconoclast, Donald Trump, the outgoing US President, will be remitting office with an enviable record of foreign policy achievements, many of which could cast a shadow on the Nobel halo his immediate predecessor attained for a mere pronouncement of vision. Unlike Barack Obama, who had a tough foreign policy grind and many setbacks during his eight years in office, Trump, in contrast, made new inroads in a short period though also disrupting many existing equations.

While his inclination for withdrawals from treaties and upsetting alliance dynamics remain as key spoilers for Trump's record, the signing of the Abraham Accords,¹ the dual summits with the North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un,² the agreement with the Taliban and plans for troop withdrawal,³ facilitating South Sudan back into the mainstream,⁴ among others, count as notable accomplishments. For that matter, even his withdrawal from the Paris Accord⁵ and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP)⁶ were the fulfilment of a declared resolve to reject agreements that supposedly affected US interests. Above all, other than the ongoing military campaign against the Islamic State (ISIS), Trump had waged fewer military campaigns and was committed to withdrawing troops from conflict zones, thus reversing long-held Republican activism in this regard.

It is in this backdrop of a robust legacy that President-elect Joseph R. Biden Jr. would be expected to realign, or from the perspective of Democrats, salvage the US grand strategy from what they perceive as the damage wrought by Trump in four years. While some observers feel Biden could stick to template Democrat dogmas including picking up from where the Obama Administration left off, the general expectation is of a mix of continuity and change in US foreign policy. Though "a fundamentally different course" has been guaranteed by Biden during his campaign, it remains to be seen whether re-alignments could be that easy in areas where Trump has caused major disruptions — be it the Iran nuclear deal or frosty US-China relations.

¹ [Text of the Abraham Accords](#), US Department of State, September 15, 2020.

² For an analysis, See Faras Ghani, "[Trump-Kim summit: Will two leaders meet for third round of talks?](#)" *Al Jazeera*, September 5, 2019.

³ "[President Donald J. Trump Is Taking A Historic Step To Achieve Peace In Afghanistan And Bring Our Troops Home](#)," The White House, February 29, 2020.

⁴ "[Trump: US to remove Sudan from Terror List](#)," *VOA News*, October 20, 2020.

⁵ "[Statement by President Trump on the Paris Climate Accord](#)," The White House, June 1, 2017.

⁶ "[What is the Trans-Pacific Partnership \(TPP\)?](#)" *CFR Background*, January 4, 2019.

From 'Make America great again' to 'Why America must lead again'

The key slogan for Biden's campaign is his call for restoring America's "dignified and respected leadership both at home and on the world stage."⁷ He has argued that security, prosperity and values of the US could only be advanced by renewing American democracy and its alliances, and by being at "the head of the table leading the world to address global challenges." Democracy, Biden contended, is the "wellspring of our power" and "amplified our leadership," and that the ability to be a force for the world, starts at home.

While various steps to 'reinforce democracy' and 'restore moral leadership' have been listed in the campaign documents, Biden's major initiative towards these goals is of hosting a Global Summit for Democracy in his first year. This summit would bring together the world's democracies to address threats to 'common values', namely: (a) fighting corruption, (b) defending against authoritarianism (including election security) and (c) advancing human rights. Furthermore, Biden talks of the growing strength of autocratic powers and their efforts to divide and manipulate democracies, and why democracies must work together to confront the rise of populists, nationalists and demagogues – a unique variety that might include some friends of the US as well.

Albeit it is clear that promoting democracy and restoring US clout would form the centre-piece of Biden's globalism, this policy activism is likely to rub against transactional relationships that Trump pursued, be it with the House of Saud or Kim Jong-Un. Though Hong Kong protestors might have cheered Trump's supportive gestures, Biden, despite having a measured approach towards China, is likely to be on the side of the democratic movement even as he highlights human rights violations in Xinjiang, on which Trump was sloppy.⁸ In fact, Biden has already backed democratic protests in Nigeria during his campaign thus making clear his intent. Furthermore, Biden has called on technology corporations and social media giants to preserve "open, democratic societies" and protect free speech, thus unveiling a vision for the times when social media has been manipulated into a medium for the subversion of democratic processes. Referring specifically to "Russian attacks on Western democracies" and "facilitating repression in China and elsewhere," Biden has reminded the tech giants that while benefiting from the fruits of democracies, they should not empower surveillance states, which spread hate and spur violence.

⁷ The Power of America's Example: The Biden Plan for Leading the Democratic World to Meet the Challenges of the 21st Century.

⁸ David Choi, "Trump told China's president that building concentration camps for millions of Uighur Muslims was 'exactly the right thing to do', former adviser," *Business Insider*, June 18, 2020.

Biden's Grand Strategy

Biden's conception of grand strategy, thus, is a comprehensive vision that aims at systemic change, driven by the belief that the foundation for moral leadership of the world has to be prepared at home, including by correcting the principles and structures that have gone awry in the past few years. Besides tailor-made domestic measures towards this end with a focus on migrants and asylum seekers, Biden promises to pursue a "foreign policy for the middle class."

Beyond doubt, Joe Biden's primary strategic mission will be to ensure a return to the pre-Trump era in which Washington spearheaded the rules-based global order as the reigning hegemon. Unlike Trump, who wavered on his conception of what 'Make America Great Again' meant for Washington's global roles, Biden is amply clear that American leadership is crucial to addressing all major global challenges by restoring its credibility and influence. Contrasting Trump's vilification of traditional allies like NATO, Biden seeks to restore the tradition of working closely with allies and other democracies to deal with current threats. These are identified as mass migration, climate change, the disruptive impact of new technologies, a renewed threat of nuclear war, transnational terrorism, cyber warfare, and also great power aggression.

Thus, "restoring and reimagining partnerships" has been listed as among the key policy goals, with Biden promising not just to reinstate the historic ties with NATO but also pledging to expand the alliance's military capabilities and strengthening cooperation with democratic partners in all regions. There is a particular mention of "fortifying our collective capabilities" in Asia and strengthening US alliances with Japan, South Korea and Australia, as well as other Asian democracies, which could imply India as well. While the 'Pivot to Asia' of Obama years does not find mention, nor does any other strategic arrangements relating to the Indo-Pacific, the reference to the 'fortification of collective capabilities' might entail partnerships projected through the Quad and other initiatives in order to take on the Chinese regional hegemony.

Another prominent declaration is about "ending forever wars in Afghanistan and the Middle East," which, in fact, has been a politically-charged theme in the last few US elections, particularly since the time Obama tried to reverse the effects of his predecessor's campaigns in these conflict zones. However, contrary to the customary Democrat-Republican divide over this subject, wherein the left-wing Democrats have been scornful of the Republican penchant for military campaigns, Trump, departing from Republican conventions, had resolutely backed realistic withdrawal plans, while also

attacking Biden for supporting the US invasion of Iraq. It might to correct such perceptions and also appeal to the left-wingers that Biden seems to have declared his plan to bring back “a vast majority of troops” from Afghanistan and to solely focus the mission on Al-Qaeda and ISIS.

Finding prominent mention in the campaign documents are two pet topics of the Democrats – climate change and arms control. Biden promises to reinvigorate the US role on these two themes, given that the Trump administration had put them on the backburner.

An economic spin-off from the climate plan: In July, Biden announced a whopping \$2 trillion climate plan that aims to transform the transport, construction, housing, agriculture and energy sectors into an emission-free eco-system.⁹ The ambitious plan seeks to generate a progressive economic spin-off that counters Trump’s claims of job loss from climate change measures while also not veering to extreme measures suggested in the ‘Green New Deal’.¹⁰ Biden’s plan envisions a Clean Energy Economy buttressed by huge investments in infrastructure that will provide for a sustainable economy while also enabling achievement of net-zero emissions by 2050.¹¹

Accordingly, he assures the creation of millions of jobs in the process of rebuilding the crumbling American infrastructure, the revival of the auto industry when shifting to an electric vehicle eco-system, setting up a new zero-emissions public transportation infrastructure described as the ‘second railroad revolution’, achieving a carbon pollution-free power sector by 2035 through greater investments in next-generation renewable hydrogen and advanced nuclear technologies, as also major investments in energy-efficient buildings and affordable housing for over 5-6 million people.

While the progressives termed it as a blueprint that will wean the US from fossil fuels and curb greenhouse emissions, the Republicans dismissed the proposals as a socialist plot. Nonetheless, the optimism over Biden’s plan is his declared intention to re-join the Paris Accord on Day one in office, and also convene a Global Climate Summit, to restore the US leadership in this endeavour.¹²

Reviving arms control: A passionate theme for the Democrats, Joe Biden’s accession to power was naturally expected to bring issues of non-proliferation

⁹ Katie Glueck and Lisa Friedman, “[Biden announces \\$2 Trillion Climate Plan](#),” *The New York Times*, July 14, 2020.

¹⁰ Lisa Friedman, “[What Is the Green New Deal? A Climate Proposal, Explained](#),” *The New York Times*, February 21, 2019.

¹¹ [The Biden Plan to Build a Modern, Sustainable Infrastructure and an Equitable Clean Energy Future](#).

¹² “[Biden says the US will rejoin the Paris climate agreement in 77 days](#),” *The Conversation*, November 6, 2020.

and arms control to the centre-stage. However, Biden inherits an inactive non-proliferation landscape with proliferation risks, other than that related to North Korea and Iran, diminishing worldwide. Moreover, the scenario has dramatically changed with initiatives like the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) taking shape, and on which Biden will have to take a stand.

Foremost on Biden's non-proliferation agenda will be the revival of the Iran nuclear deal or the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), a key achievement for the Obama administration which Trump derailed. Biden's campaign documents, while blaming Trump for prompting Iran to restart its nuclear programme and bringing the region to the cusp of another war, proclaim that "if Tehran returns to compliance with the deal, President Biden would re-enter the agreement using hard-nosed diplomacy and extend it." Biden also promises action on Iran's other destabilizing activities. This would be easier said than done considering that Iran has by now considerably advanced in uranium enrichment and has revived activity in facilities that were restricted by the agreement.

Furthermore, Iranian hardliners might not easily agree to any reversal to JCPOA standards, and, instead, could drive hard bargains for major concessions, including ending of sanctions.¹³ Trump, on the other hand, has been reportedly mulling last-minute actions, including a military strike, which could make it difficult for Biden to salvage the relationship with Tehran.¹⁴ However, the choice of Jake Sullivan, who played a key role in the JCPOA negotiations, as National Security Advisor-designate is indication of the direction Biden could take on the Iran nuclear deal.

Biden, though, does not seem to have any significant plans for North Korea and has reportedly insisted that he will consider summits with Kim Jong-Un only if Pyongyang meets his conditions. The campaign documents state that Biden will "empower our negotiators and jump start a sustained and coordinated campaign with allies and others, including China, to advance our shared objective of a denuclearized North Korea." It is doubtful whether China, given the current levels of estrangement with the US, will support Biden's plans. The other declarations on the arms control front include Biden's commitment to pursue an extension of New START Treaty, and also fulfil the unfinished task of the Obama administration in pursuing steps to reduce the role of nuclear weapons and restrict it to the sole purpose of

¹³ Mohammad Ayatollahi Tabaar, "No Matter Who Is U.S. President, Iran Will Drive a Harder Bargain Than Before," *Foreign Affairs*, October 20, 2020.

¹⁴ Eric Schmitt, "Trump Sought Options for Attacking Iran to Stop Its Growing Nuclear Program," *New York Times*, November 16, 2020.

deterring and retaliating against a nuclear attack. These elements could make up the building blocks of Biden's National Security Strategy (NSS).

Great powers and global security

If Biden is found to be wanting on any particular segment of foreign policy articulations, it is on China, an area where Trump had managed to gain the upper-hand with his sustained belligerence. He has also targeted Biden for his family's alleged financial linkages with China.¹⁵ Trump has talked tough with China, including on trade deals and made aggressive political moves, like hosting the head of the Central Tibetan Administration in the White House. Even while holding true to his words on making China accountable on issues like human rights and democratic movements, Biden may not make any immediate reconciliatory moves towards China. The Biden camp has also rejected the Trump administration's policy positions on trade deals with China, by charging that American farmers are paying for the subsidies, implying possible revisions in US approach towards the issue.

Biden, though, has tilted the scales when it comes to Russia having confronted Trump's softer approach towards President Vladimir Putin, and declaring his intention to hold Russia accountable for interference in the US elections and for allegedly paying bounties to kill American soldiers in Afghanistan. Nonetheless, going by the high-stakes involved in such diplomatic tussles, and going by Biden's reputation as a deal-maker than a confrontationist, it is unlikely for Biden to develop a hostile approach beyond the existing framework of moderated contests balanced by a measured engagement.

The other challenging area is the Middle East where Biden will have to carry on the legacy of Abraham Accords, countenance the hardline course of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and build bridges with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to create an enabling environment for his policies with regard to the two-state solution in Palestine and for a potential engagement with Iran.

Biden and India

The strategic partnership between the world's two largest democracies, India and the US, has institutionalized over the past decade to the extent that new

¹⁵ James Lindsay, "[Campaign Foreign Policy Roundup: Biden and Trump Debate Foreign Policy, Kinda](#)," *CFR Blog*, October 23, 2020.

incumbents at the White House were expected only to perfect the bonding, irrespective of any number of irritants that may remain as policy residue.¹⁶ The certitude of the institutionalized character of this relationship is most embodied by the manner in which successive political leaderships in both New Delhi and Washington – be it Prime Ministers Manmohan Singh or Narendra Modi on the Indian side or Presidents Barack Obama or Donald Trump on the US Side – have sustained and advanced the momentum established by their predecessors. Events like the ‘Howdy Modi’ in the US and ‘Namaste Trump’ in Ahmedabad embody the personal equations that have also been built by the political leaderships on both sides.¹⁷

That such high camaraderie will continue into the Biden administration is evident in the ease with which Prime Minister Modi established early affinities with the President-elect. With Antony Blinken slated to become Biden’s Secretary of State, there is optimism that India-US relations are set to go notches higher, going by Blinken’s record of supporting the India-US nuclear deal and his recent statement that “strengthening and deepening the relationship with India is going to be a very high priority.”¹⁸

Notwithstanding these factors, a highlight of the Biden Administration’s proposed agenda is the significance given to Indian-Americans in the scheme of things. Like in the case of the African, Central American and Arab American communities, Biden promises a rich initiative to serve the interests of Indian Americans — probably the first such targeted plan for ethnic minorities.¹⁹ Starting with the promise to reform the immigration system, Biden talks about steps to stem racial hate and religious bigotry targeting Indian communities, restore the ‘American dream’ for immigrants by particularly promoting measures for small-time Indian entrepreneurs, providing a roadmap of citizenship for the undocumented 5 lakh Indians, clear the family visa backlog and increase visas for work-based immigration for Indian professionals.

Besides proposals like visas for religious workers, honouring the diversity and contributions of Indian Americans and eliminating language barriers for the community, Biden wraps up the agenda by promising to support the India-US partnership, thus conjoining the relationship with India as integral to the assimilation of Indian Americans in the nation’s politico-economic and socio-cultural matrix.

¹⁶ For a conversation, see [India-US strategic partnership: the way ahead](#), MP-IDSA Round table transcript, November 30, 2010.

¹⁷ [A dossier on recent evolution of India-US relations](#), Ministry of External Affairs, June 2017.

¹⁸ [“Transcript: Dialogues on American Foreign Policy and World Affairs: A Conversation with Former Deputy Secretary of State Antony Blinken,” Hudson Institute](#), July 9, 2020.

¹⁹ [Joe Biden’s Agenda for the Indian American Community](#).

Conclusion

Biden comes to office with an ambitious agenda that seems not just aimed at dismantling Trumpism and the purported damage Trump did to 'Brand America', specifically on the issues of multilateralism and US global leadership. The veteran politician and statesman in Biden pledges to, in turn, reinvigorate the ideological underpinnings that anchors the global dominance and influence the US has wielded since the post-War years. The indications pertaining to a proactive American grand strategy is evident in the nominations for the Biden cabinet wherein veteran mandarins with proven policy expertise have been preferred over political choices. In all likelihood, the next four years could see the Biden administration following a grand strategy that restores American primacy and the US returning to its role as the pivot of global politics and security.

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