

**PRESIDENT JOE BIDEN AND THE  
RESTORATION OF US GLOBAL LEADERSHIP**

**TURNING THE TIDE?**

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## TURNING THE TIDE?

- As president, Joe Biden will seek to re-establish US global leadership through serious engagement and cooperation; at a global level, climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic, and nuclear weapons are three areas where he sees cooperation as essential.
- European governments welcome the prospect of more cooperative and professional transatlantic relations to tackle global challenges and security issues in the neighbourhood. However, differences over burden-sharing, relations with China, and economic policies – in particular regarding the digital transformation – remain.
- The Biden administration’s policies in the Indo-Pacific will focus on reinforcing alliances and partnerships and developing the military capabilities to defend the regional order, while aiming for issue-based cooperation with China. Even so, a tougher line against Beijing will remain.
- For the Nordic states, Biden’s overall increased focus on multilateralism and the transatlantic relationship is unquestionably a positive change, even if the new administration is unlikely to radically change direct bilateral relations, which, on the whole, are good.



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## TURNING THE TIDE?

### RESETTING THE US FOREIGN POLICY COMPASS

The election of Joe Biden as president and Kamala Harris as vice president of the United States has generally been welcomed across the world. Allies and partners are relieved that they will again be treated with respect as common issues are addressed, while having been reminded that they too must ‘step up’ and not only rely on the United States. Even adversaries and competitors acknowledge that it is preferable for the north star of US foreign policy to be something other than impulsive unpredictability. Based on Joe Biden’s worldview, the world will see a return to more traditional foreign policy precepts. This is reflected in Biden’s choice of individuals for senior security policy positions in his administration.

While the United States is a global power, each administration addresses the more enduring national interests in different ways. In the coming years, key issues to address include, first, global challenges such as climate change and pandemics; second, strengthening the transatlantic relationship and global cooperation between democratic states more broadly; and third, reinforcing the US relationship with various Asian allies and partners, and managing competition with China. From a Nordic perspective, the Biden administration is expected to continue the cooperative agenda regarding regional security (bolstering defence cooperation and deterring against Russian encroachment) carried over from the Obama and Trump administrations, while more robustly addressing global issues such as climate change.

### TESTS OF US LEADERSHIP, DOMESTIC AND FOREIGN

Biden has pledged that under his administration, the United States would seek to ‘restore [...] [its] *respected leadership* on the world stage’. In his assessment, ‘[t]he United States must lead not just with the example of power, but the power of our example’.<sup>1</sup> These are lofty

statements that underline key strands in how President-elect Biden thinks when it comes to the role of the United States in the international arena. America’s global friends will almost unanimously welcome efforts by Biden to reassert US commitment to international institutions – such as the UN and NATO – and the broader rules-based order, as well as to rebuild relationships with key allies in Europe and the Indo-Pacific region.

Despite Biden’s high-flown pledges, the new administration has a tough task ahead, with multiple domestic and global challenges. One issue weighing heavily on the minds of leaders in other countries is how far Biden will actually go. For instance, returning to the Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA, Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) or renegotiating US entry into the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP; now CPTPP, Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership) will be tougher asks than reiterating US commitment to NATO’s Article 5 or re-joining the Paris Agreement on climate change. Any pretensions of global leadership for a superpower like the United States are intimately tied to three interrelated factors: material (i.e. economic and military) endowments, domestic (political) factors, and international followership.<sup>2</sup> At present, all three pose potential headaches for the incoming administration.

First, taking a *longue durée* perspective, much has recently been made of the relative power shift from the United States to China, or from the West to ‘the Rest’. Although the US retains a considerable lead in military power capabilities over its most pertinent near-peer competitor, America’s ‘unipolar moment’ is slowly receding as the 21st century progresses. The Covid-19 pandemic has added a new layer of uncertainty to this process.

Second, the presidential election showed that the United States remains a polarized country afflicted by hyper-partisanship. Internal dynamics are far more important than at any time during the Cold War; politics does not stop at the water’s edge. The election result has illustrated that Donald Trump’s brand of

1 The Biden-Harris Presidential Campaign, ‘The Power of America’s Example: The Biden Plan for Leading the Democratic World to Meet The Challenges of the 21st Century,’ 2020, <https://joebiden.com/americanleadership/#>.

2 See e.g. Ville Sinkkonen, *Failing Hegemony? Four Essays on the Global Engagement of the United States of America in the 21st Century* (Turku: University of Turku, 2020), <http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-951-29-8262-2>.

politics still enjoys sizable support in the country, and his transactionalist, aloof and even nativist approach to the wider world is a key part of this appeal. Thus, President-elect Biden has also emphasized that he would conduct a 'foreign policy for the middle class',<sup>3</sup> suggesting that under his leadership the US will not necessarily reassume its traditional role as an unequivocal defender of liberal trading practices. Political gridlock in Washington D.C. is likely to affect Biden's ability to gain funding for key foreign policy initiatives that the Republicans appear unwilling to support, such as climate action or cooperation on the pandemic under the auspices of the World Health Organization (WHO).

Alongside political gridlock in Washington D.C., there has been a discernible shift in the debates that take place within the US foreign policy establishment. The hitherto dominant liberal-internationalist/interventionist approach is challenged by robust arguments regarding 'offshore balancing', 'restraint' or 'retrenchment', calling for a reduced global military presence and less focus on the promotion of liberal-democratic values to, feasibly, guard against 'imperial overstretch'.<sup>4</sup>

Third, and relatedly, the Biden presidency needs followers if it is to restore American leadership in the international arena. Traditionally, the US has fostered such followership by tying its power to international institutions that not only foster cooperation but also enjoy a modicum of global legitimacy. It has also nurtured a network of allies and partners that have consented to US leadership in return for certain 'public goods', including open trade arteries or security protection, that are provided by the leader. These institutional and relational dimensions of US leadership have become increasingly strained during the Trump presidency, as the White House incumbent sought to reframe US international engagement in terms of a narrow 'America First' reading of national interests. While Trump's reign was limited to one administration, it has served as a needed wakeup call for partners and allies, especially in Europe.

## ADDRESSING GLOBAL CHALLENGES

Biden's decades of foreign policy experience, as a senator and as vice president, are apparent in the way in which he seeks to address the most pressing global challenges through increased cooperation. In the short term this means COVID-19, as well as preparation for future pandemics. Of more consequence in Biden's view is climate change, which he views as an existential threat, writing that 'If we don't get this right, nothing else will matter'.<sup>5</sup> This implies a determination about addressing the issue, confirmed by his appointment of former Secretary of State, John Kerry, as the climate change envoy. Biden has made it clear that he would immediately set the US on course to rejoin the Paris Agreement, seek more ambitious agreements, and place the US on a path to achieve net-zero emissions by 2050. A more limited but global challenge is posed by nuclear weapons, which Biden has said must be addressed not only with Russia but also China, even if extending the US-Russia New START is likely to be a first step. In the future, Biden may even consider announcing a no-first-use policy.

Biden sees the multilateral international institutions and alliances that the US helped to build as Washington's greatest foreign policy accomplishment since the Second World War. It is hardly surprising therefore that Biden is intent upon supporting and working through those international institutions, including the United Nations and its 'family' of organizations, such as the WHO. The overall attitude of the incoming administration towards international organizations is also more positive, with Biden arguing during his 2008 presidential campaign that the United States has voted for UN operations in the Security Council and must therefore ensure that its economic contribution is in line with its expressed political ambition.

President-elect Biden also sees the need for the US to work with those with whom it shares the foundational idea of the importance of democracy. While Biden has not used the 'league of democracies' term, he has called for a 'Summit for Democracy' to agree on means to combat corruption, defend against authoritarianism, and advance human rights. Biden has promised to issue a presidential directive making the fight against corruption a core national security interest, including attempts to bring increased transparency to global financial flows. Defending against

3 Joseph R. Biden Jr., 'Why America Must Lead Again,' *Foreign Affairs*, 99, no. 2 (2020), 64–76.

4 Cf. Thomas J. Wright, 'The Folly of Retrenchment,' *Foreign Affairs*, 99, no. 2 (2020): 10–18; John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, 'The Case for Offshore Balancing,' *Foreign Affairs*, 95, no. 4 (2016): 70–84; Stephen Wertheim, 'The Price of Primacy,' *Foreign Affairs*, 99, no. 2 (2020), 19–29.

5 Biden, 'Why America Must Lead Again,' p. 74.





President-elect Biden introduced his national security team in a cabinet announcement event in November.  
 Source: Lehtikuva/AFP

authoritarianism is seen to include election security and helping allies to halt ongoing slides towards authoritarianism; this may cause some friction as Hungary, Poland and Turkey, for example, fall into this category of treaty allies.

## TRANSATLANTIC RELATIONS UNDER BIDEN

The mood in EU capitals after Biden's victory can best be described as cautiously hopeful. Hopeful, because Biden's transatlantic and multilateral approach to foreign policy matches European preferences and allows – at the very least – for the dialogue to be restarted on many of the joint challenges. Cautious, because more than during previous presidential transitions, European governments are acutely aware of Biden's leadership challenges both at home and in a more competitive international environment.

Biden's victory reshuffles intra-EU politics. The Franco-German core agrees on the positive assessment of the opportunities of the new US administration.<sup>6</sup> Biden might support efforts to strengthen European strategic autonomy on defence matters if it does not represent a decoupling from the US and NATO. An

increase in the EU's role in securing its own neighbourhood would be particularly welcomed by a US that focuses its security efforts elsewhere. A new focus on the EU as a security framework could displease the Polish government, which fared well under Trump's bilateral approach to security cooperation.

On Ukraine, the Biden administration is likely to show more continuity in security matters, making it clear that the United States supports Ukraine in its fight against Russia by, among other things, continuing to provide 'lethal aid'. While the Western Balkans are unlikely to be a top priority for the Biden administration, a more cooperative and coherent approach might help to make progress in the region. Whereas previous years have been marked by lost opportunities, EU-US cooperation on the Balkans could now focus on a coordinated diplomatic approach to Serbia-Kosovo talks, the fight against corruption in the region, and a pushback against Russian interference tactics.

Turkey will be a challenge for the new Biden administration. If Biden's goal is to reinstate US leadership, the US has many reasons to follow a tougher approach towards Turkey, condemn authoritarian developments, impose sanctions on Turkey's S-400 weapons procurement from Russia, and push back against Ankara's aggressive stance in the Mediterranean. While Turkey as a NATO partner still has strategic relevance in the region, Erdogan will have difficulties

<sup>6</sup> Jean-Yves Le Drian and Heiko Maas, 'Joe Biden Can Make Transatlantic Unity Possible,' *Washington Post*, November 16, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/11/16/german-french-foreign-ministers-joe-biden-transatlantic-unity/>.

in engaging a more professional and multilaterally focused Biden foreign-policy machinery.

While the NATO family as a whole is happy to welcome a 'return to normal' with a Biden presidency, it is clear that equitable burden-sharing, strategic direction and the increasing heterogeneity of the membership will remain issues irrespective of who is in office as US president. NATO members will have to ensure that they fulfil their commitments in terms of raw defence spending numbers and increased capabilities.

EU and US cooperation on trade and regulations is, however, likely to initially receive the lion's share of the attention. The incoming US Secretary of State, Tony Blinken, has already called for an end to the 'artificial trade war' with the EU.<sup>7</sup> While a return to the ambitious TTIP agenda of the past is unlikely, the idea of a more limited trade deal on industrial goods has been floated.

Transatlantic economic and technological cooperation will be an important element in countering a more assertive China in the eyes of the Biden administration. While the EU is increasingly prepared to confront Chinese economic assertiveness and technological threats, it prefers to do so via multilateral engagement and with limited compromises as far as its trade interests are concerned. The fact that Biden's incoming national security advisor has emphasized cooperation with likeminded partners and warned against full-scale decoupling when confronting China might indicate that there will be common ground.<sup>8</sup> EU seems to be willing to tackle these issues head-on, and has discussed new formats for close cooperation on trade and technological cooperation in late 2020.

## THE INDO-PACIFIC THEATRE

The Indo-Pacific region will become a key priority for the Biden administration. The world's fastest-growing region is witnessing rapidly expanding economic integration, as well as deepening connectivity networks, not least driven forward by China. It houses five out of seven of the US's main collective security treaties and is marked by a high number of regional flashpoints, including Taiwan, North Korea, the East China Sea,

and the South China Sea. Just as importantly, China's rise is perceived as aiming to challenge and revise the established world order.<sup>9</sup>

President Barack Obama's 'Pivot to Asia', launched in 2012 and later rebranded as a 'Rebalance to Asia', may have been a diplomatic and rhetorical success, but largely failed on the ground. US leadership further eroded as Trump advocated bilateral trade deals and took a transactionalist approach to allies, casting doubts on US commitments in Asia. Partly as a result of this, Japan took on a leading role in continuing negotiations for the successor to the TPP, the CPTPP. In general, allies and partners have shown more willingness to balance the rise of China (and hedge against potential future US abandonment) by becoming more proactive and increasing cooperation among themselves and with the US. Japan and Australia, for example, have been boosting their defence cooperation, and Japan has been very proactive in driving forward the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, commonly referred to as 'the Quad', a forum for security discussions with the US, Australia and India.

Joe Biden will almost certainly place greater emphasis on the Indo-Pacific than his predecessor, but what would a successful Indo-Pacific policy look like? As argued by Michael Green, in order to have an effective grand strategy, the US needs to implement a threefold strategic concept.<sup>10</sup> First, reinforce a regional order underpinned by US leadership and strong alliances, partnerships, trade agreements and multilateral engagement; second, work towards a stable and productive relationship with China; and third, continue to ensure the military capabilities necessary to defeat attempts to overturn the current regional order. Biden faces tough challenges in all three fields.

The new administration will aim to restore trust and credibility in order to strengthen the network of allies and partners. Trust in the US as an ally and a leading power in the region has decreased significantly among partners in Asia, and American influence has become noticeably weaker. Biden has already initiated this trust restoration process, confirming to newly-appointed Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga that the security treaty applies to the contested Senkaku Islands, for example. Rebuilding relations with other

7 Quoted in Reuters, 'Biden Would End Trade War with EU, but Focus on Fixing Imbalance in AG Trade: Adviser,' September 22, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trade-eu-biden-idUSKCN26D1UN>.

8 Kurt M. Campbell and Jake Sullivan, 'Competition Without Catastrophe: How America Can Both Challenge and Coexist with China,' *Foreign Affairs* 98, no. 5 (2019), 96-110.

9 See U.S. Department of State, 'The Elements of the China Challenge,' November 2020, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/20-02832-Elements-of-China-Challenge-508.pdf>.

10 Green, Michael. 2017. *By More Than Providence: Grand Strategy and American Power in the Asia Pacific Since 1783*. New York: Columbia University Press, p. 543.

allies such as South Korea and the Philippines remains key. In the field of international economic policy, Biden is unlikely to return to megaregional trade negotiations, upholding the banner of ‘a foreign policy for the middle class’.

As for US relations with China, both countries ultimately seek a less conflictual bilateral relationship, but what that means in practice differs significantly. For the US, a tougher line against China, including tariffs, will likely remain, in light of the bipartisan consensus on this issue. At the same time, however, the US will seek issue-based cooperation with China in fields such as climate change, global health and pandemics, and non-proliferation. Denuclearizing North Korea in particular requires a constructive relationship with China. Continuing the ‘strategic dialogues’ initiated during the Obama administration seems likely, as well as developing some mutual ‘rules of the road’ in the security realm.

In the military sphere, the Biden administration will likely invest in projecting naval power in order to deter China. The Trump administration floated ambitious plans to expand the number of vessels in the Indo-Pacific earlier this year with a view to maintaining naval superiority over Beijing. In order to restore the credibility of the US in the eyes of regional allies, it is expected that Biden will underwrite an expansion of US military capabilities in the region, while pushing its allies to contribute more concretely to support freedom of navigation and cyber defence efforts.

## **A MORE RESTRAINED APPROACH IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA**

Like its two predecessors, the Biden administration comes into office determined to place less emphasis on the Greater Middle East region. Although the president-elect did support the 2003 invasion of Iraq, by and large his inclinations vis-à-vis the region have been cautious. In the Obama administration, the then vice president was sceptical of the so-called troop surge in Afghanistan in 2009, uneasy about pressing for Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak to resign in January 2011, and opposed to the US intervention in Libya in March of the same year.

Yet such a restrained approach to the region would not entail placing America’s cherished liberal-democratic values on the back burner. In contrast to Trump, whose embrace of the region’s autocrats was far too

warm for the administration’s critics, Biden would be more willing to publicly hold America’s regional partners accountable on human rights issues. In the case of Saudi Arabia, for instance, US assistance could become increasingly contingent upon how Riyadh conducts its regional forays, especially with regard to the war in Yemen. For Egypt, new strings could be attached to US military aid if human rights violations persist.

In terms of broader regional security dynamics, the Biden administration is likely to opt for a less ambitious military posture, while trying to exploit and create diplomatic openings that would foster longer-term stability and regional order.<sup>11</sup> This includes building on the recent agreements between Israel and the UAE and Bahrain. In terms of the US-Israel relationship, Biden will assume a more critical stance towards the construction of settlements in the West Bank and seek re-engagement with a Palestinian leadership largely shunned by Trump. However, the time does not seem ripe for rejuvenating negotiations based on the two-state solution, which the president-elect supports in principle.

When it comes to Iran and the JCPOA, the Biden team will seek to reopen the diplomatic file, but progress will require willingness on the part of Iran to come back into compliance with the terms of the nuclear deal. The entire effort may be further complicated by the recent assassination of a key figure in the Iranian nuclear program. While thousands of US troops will remain in the region, their focus is likely to shift more narrowly to counter-terrorism operations against old adversaries such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS, as well as contributing to the deterrence of Iran.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR THE NORDIC STATES – LIFE IMPROVES AND GOES ON**

From a Nordic perspective, the Biden administration’s focus on multilateralism on a global scale and efforts to improve the transatlantic relationship are more than welcome. It will allow for a re-engagement at the highest US-Nordic political levels on a range of issues, from combatting climate change to improving global gender equality. Yet it is important to acknowledge that during the Trump administration, direct bilateral relationships did not suffer in ways that plagued many

<sup>11</sup> Daniel Benaim and Jake Sullivan, ‘America’s Opportunity in the Middle East: Diplomacy Could Succeed Where Military Force Has Failed,’ *Foreign Affairs*, May 22, 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2020-05-22/americas-opportunity-middle-east>.





In 2011, vice president Biden met President of Finland Tarja Halonen in Helsinki on the 100th Anniversary of International Women's Day. In his remarks to the president, Biden praised Finland's work towards gender equality.  
*Source: White House/David Lienemann (CC BY 3.0)*

other allies and partners around the globe. Rather, in the fields of security and defence – following the path laid by the Obama administration – during Trump's tenure US cooperation with the Nordics became deeper and more active. The Nordics also see a need for increased European cooperation on defence, multi- and multilaterally as well as through NATO and the EU, something that will likely be welcomed by the Biden administration.

The Biden administration is also likely to welcome Nordic coordination and joint actions across a range of issues. The Arctic is an obvious area, and while the Nordics would like to emphasize cooperation in the region while simultaneously deepening defence cooperation, the geopolitical realities that are further exacerbated by 'great power competition' between the US and China mean that neither the US nor the Nordics should expect to agree on all Arctic matters.

However, as 'defending democracy' is emerging as a theme for the Biden administration, the five Nordic countries could help the Biden administration reach some of its goals at the proposed Summit for Democracy. Overall, the most significant impact of the change in administrations is that the international rules-based order, on which all of the export-driven small Nordic states rely, sees its historical champion return. Combined with clear efforts to improve the transatlantic relationship, also critical for all Nordic countries, the generally optimistic atmosphere in the Nordic capitals is understandable. The magnitude of global, regional and domestic challenges – all of which are crying out for immediate attention by President Biden – is recognized among the Nordics, and it seems likely that they will be happy to seek out opportunities to work with and support efforts to tackle those challenges. /