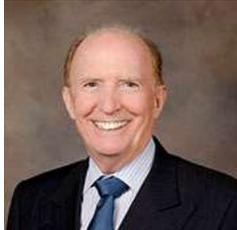


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“The Readiness is All:” A Possible Joe Biden Presidency



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As the US presidential election approaches, so many people are asking: “what then?” This question is pertinent not just inside America but virtually everywhere.

What can already be foretold is that the world will look no different the day after the election (November 4th – or whenever the result is officially announced) than the day before. That includes the fact that US influence in the world is no longer as great as it has been. This statement is not necessarily an indictment of US foreign and domestic policies, but is also about two facts: first, the rise of competitive powers, notably China and Russia (but don’t forget about India, over time). Second, since the death of the Soviet Union, friends and allies of the United States have not had to shelter under America’s wing but can and do regularly pursue their national interests and policies without first looking to see what Washington wants. The United States can set only part of the global agenda, indeed less so with each passing year. Former Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis said: “The enemy also gets a vote.” That truism also applies to America’s role in the world, in general, and increasingly so, which even some US foreign policy elites have not yet fathomed.

The only surprising thing about these observations is that it has taken so long for them to be realized, and even now they are not universally accepted.

Whoever Wins, The World Will be the Same

Whether Donald Trump is re-elected or Joe Biden becomes president, the global environment in which either has to respond will, as least for some considerable time, be the same. With Trump, “the past” will be very much “prologue,” unless he were to go through a most improbable “sea change.” With Biden, very little is known about what he would actually do as president – indeed, it can’t be known – until he would actually take over the reins of power. Whatever a new president has previously done in his career, there is no training ground to hold that office. Having been Vice President can help, at least in seeing the exercise of power from close up: both Richard Nixon and George H. W. Bush benefited from 8 years in that office, as would Biden. But that’s about it.

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Biden's Tone Would be Better: This May be the Most-Positive Change

What does seem relatively clear about a Biden presidency is that the tone would be different from Trump's. He would be more respectful toward allies and other partners (as well as toward the American people!) He would stop pretending that Covid-19 will just go away or be amenable to a range of solutions that are not yet apparent. In the process of dealing with the pandemic, he would understand that working with other countries, and not just friends and allies, will be vital: all will sink or swim together. Whether what he would actually do would be different from a Trump presidency, at least there should be more confidence that Biden was at least trying to apply the best understanding, scientific and otherwise.

Domestic Demands Come First

Further, Biden would immediately find that he needs to pay much greater attention than any administration has for years to the structure and practice of the US economy and politics. That starts with dealing with the long-term effects of Covid-19. There will be no going back to "normality" in terms of economics, business, and American society, and what changes will take place at home are no more knowable than what will be the long-term impact of Covid-19 on the world and on relations among nations.

Among many other requirements at home will need to be trillion-dollar programs to renew infrastructure, plus major, long-term efforts to deal with the crisis of race relations, which again has burst forth, this time in major part because of the critical role that minorities have played in dealing with the Covid-19 crisis, both in providing health care and in keeping the US service economy going. This time, the "race genie" will not be pushed back into the bottle. (Even Trump, with his white supremacy agenda now, would not find that possible.)

In sum, a stronger and better functioning America will be a *sine qua non* if it is to be able to meet expectations that others have about its role in the world.

Basic Biden Principles

Beyond realizing the need to act on underlying domestic challenges, Biden would certainly endorse the idea of a liberal international order, whatever that will mean in practice by next year. He would reassert American support for democracies and human rights. He would place heavy emphasis on rebuilding alliances, including NATO, where doubts have been raised about American steadfastness. (It is another matter whether current doubts have a basis in reality – even under Trump the United States is not ignoring its enduring interests – or more about perceptions regarding Trump's statements about the Alliance and his brutishness both at home and abroad.)

Biden would likely rejoin the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and be amenable to pursuing negotiations on the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), though with caveats. What has been happening in the United States (as elsewhere) with the shock of Covid-19 is likely to make it more self-interested about the terms and conditions of trade agreements. That was already true with Democrat Hillary Clinton during the 2016 presidential campaign. As part of this assessment, Biden has already served notice that the US will not agree to a trade deal with the United Kingdom, unless the latter's "Irish question" with the European Union is resolved

satisfactorily. Further, like other US administrations, Biden would drive hard trade bargains and would be inclined to play Britain off against the European Union – a matter of US economic, commercial, and consumer interests, not of international politics.

A Biden administration would also likely try to do some reining in of open-ended “globalization” and US vulnerability to import supply chains, whether or not there is all that much the US government has to say about it, as opposed to the roles of the private sector and consumer preferences. Something similar will be true about climate change: a Biden presidency would certainly embrace the goal, but the costs and other impediments to actually doing something about it will limit what Biden (or Trump or any other person in the Oval Office) could do in practice. There can be little question that this is long-term “Issue One” for the US and the world; but it will also be a herculean task of getting to “carbon neutral” within any reasonable time frame (that is, before it is “too late”). The economics and hence the politics are not there in any country that really matters, and that regrettable fact will with little doubt also continue to be true in the United States. Further, all the talk about “renewables” that we have heard in this presidential campaign season ignores that alternatives like solar and wind cannot possibly take up the slack to replace dependence on fossil fuels, and the United States is still averse to new nuclear power plants.

The Most Important and Persistent Challenges

This list of likely Biden approaches marks about where the “broad sunlit uplands” (with limitations) would come to an end – though having a president in the Oval Office with greater knowledge and a desire to look beyond his own narrow self-interests would certainly be a great relief to those abroad who still look to the United States for significant leadership in common endeavors. But the range of alternatives open in some major areas to a Biden administration would not be different from those open to a Trump Mark II.

Middle East

Biden would immediately face three other major problems (amid a host of lesser ones). First and least daunting over the long term is the Middle East. Most prominently in regard to current Trump policies, Biden has promised to return the United States to the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) regarding the Iranian nuclear program, from which agreement Trump withdrew the United States in 2018. But what Biden has said so far comes with a hook: Iran would first have to return to full compliance with the JCPOA. It is not tit-for-tat, but “you first.” Whether that would play in Teheran is unlikely; and Biden has also signed on publicly to virtually the full list of demands imposed on Iran by the Trump administration. As for Persian Gulf security and dealing with shifting Middle East political, economic, cultural, and strategic sands, Biden would inherit today’s near-vacuum of intelligent US foreign policy, with no strategically-coherent guideposts inherited from Trump. Meanwhile, no one should expect that Israeli-Palestinian issues would be anywhere near the top of the Biden agenda. Even if it weren’t for other pressing regional matters (including Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Turkey, Russia, etc.), US domestic politics would inhibit any Biden flexibility. He has also never shown any inclination to take on the domestic lobby.

Russia

Russia will be a more important strategic challenge. Some perspective is needed, however, which at the moment is essentially lacking in the United States. Despite all the talk and concern in the United States about a resurgent Russia, beyond difficulties for the West that it does and will continue to pose along its periphery – especially Central Europe and the Middle East -- It will not return to the ranks of superpowers: few of the basic requirements of power and influence exist in Russia and are not likely to increase substantially. Even its renewed military power has limited political utility. Its increased influence stems to a considerable degree from Vladimir Putin's license in exploiting US policy miscues, especially in the Middle East and parts of Central Europe.

In any event, Biden could be expected to recommit the United States to the NATO Treaty's Article 5 and continue providing US military wherewithal to underscore that commitment. Further, a positive note for a Biden administration's approach to Russia would be clear understanding that the New Start Treaty, which expires in 2021, needs to be renewed, and Russia is most likely to agree. At the same time, there is little awareness among American foreign policy elites that a "pesky" Russia is here to stay and can't just be either ignored or contained. Regarding the latter, Russian opportunism abroad doesn't rise to the level of requiring an encompassing overall Western approach – certainly not justifying a new cold war, and the United States would not find a unified Western front.

Even if Biden were disposed to try developing a different, less stressful relationship with Moscow (assuming Russia would reciprocate on terms acceptable to the West), and even to explore renewal of George H. W. Bush's goal of fashioning a "Europe whole and free and at peace," US domestic politics would get in the way. Russian interference in the 2016 (and very likely the 2020) election put paid to that, along with the domestic political use the Democrats made of the Russia issue to try explaining why Hillary Clinton lost in 2016 and also to underpin the impeachment of Trump, which was always doomed to fail. Ironically, Trump's apparent instincts about needing to try including Russia in the outside world – however he arrived at this perspective – are more in US and Western interests than the "do-no-business-with-Putin" policy of US Democrats and many Republicans.

China

China will be the most important and long-term daunting foreign policy issue facing a Biden presidency. The parameters have been much discussed, and Biden's comments so far about China have not been that much different from Trump's, without either of them demonstrating strategic coherence. At least two factors will be particularly inhibiting to the United States' developing integrated policies that have a reasonable chance of both countering China's challenges to Western interests and trying to create a viable basis for mutual accommodation over the longer-term. The first is the scope of China's ambitions, which will have to be dealt with in detail, as opposed to the risks of rigidity and inflexibility that would flow from adopting an encompassing approach like the Cold War with the Soviet Union. The latter is the course that both US political parties now seem bent on following. In addition, China has globe-spanning economic "weapons" that the Soviet Union never had. Further, the US is unlikely to be able to forge the degree of unity

on China among all regional countries (and, at least for a hardline approach, certainly not with key European countries) that was developed in Europe against Moscow.

The second factor is that there has so far not been coalescence within Washington or among stakeholders in America overall about US or Western interests, objectives, and approaches regarding China. Calculations among different groups of Americans – business, banks, technologically developers, consumers, human rights advocates, military leaders, and proponents of strategic cooperation (notably concerning North Korea) - are not in alignment and in some cases their goals are incompatible. There is also not yet a process in Washington for reconciling dramatic differences regarding contending perspectives. That problem did not exist in US-European relations regarding the Soviet threat of the late 1940s. Further, China (along with the Far East in general) is still far more *terra incognita* to most Americans than Europe ever was, even during the isolationism of the 1930s. Thus whatever Biden might want to do in terms of long-term relations with China, he would first have to create a domestic political base for containing further rise of Sino-American tensions, assuming that would be possible with Beijing.

The World Will Watch From “Day One”

Of course, the “outside world” would be watching closely how the Biden administration would approach all these issues. There will be four early indicators. The first, which is called in American policy parlance “inside baseball,” is the methodology that Biden would create to manage foreign policy and national security. The gold standard was developed by Nixon and was followed until the end of the Bill Clinton administration. It centers on a primary strategic and coordinating role for the National Security Council in the White House: there is no such thing as dispersed “cabinet government” in foreign policy that has any chance of working. But since Clinton, dysfunction or sheer sloppiness of process has often prevailed more than managerial competence. Even Barack Obama (with Joe Biden at the table) failed to get it right consistently. A “rule book” of good experience does exist (see the George H. W. Bush “edition”), if Biden and his team are prepared to consult it.

More important is that the United States now faces, intellectually, the most difficult set of matters to get right since at least the early years after the end of the Cold War, when the George H.W. Bush and Clinton administrations did pretty well in meeting the extraordinary business of cleaning up the detritus of the Cold War and beginning to fashion a new set of approaches to the world, especially in Europe. The most important organizational requirement for a Biden administration will be to create a capacity to “relate apples to oranges,” from one end of the world to the others. That must include integrating the full range of US instruments of power and influence (diplomatic, military, economic, etc., plus public and private sectors.) This skill-set has atrophied in the US over the last two decades. People do exist who are adept at it: but it is not clear that Biden would identify them, hire them, and then insist that their perspectives be included in all major foreign policy decisions. (Trump certainly hasn’t and wouldn’t in a second term.) Most recent presidents have not followed this prescription, focusing mostly on tactics. All of them – and the nation -- have paid for it.

A third requirement for a Biden or a Trump administration is to start the process of educating Americans (beginning with foreign policy elites) to the fact that the United States will no longer

necessarily be Number One (except, very likely, in most military categories and perhaps, at least for a time, overall in the total compass of economic influence) but will have to make major psychological adjustments. This will mean moving beyond attitudes that have been central to US involvement in the world since Pearl Harbor: a hard sell.

A final problem is that, since the end of the Cold War, the US think-tank and related communities haven't done an adequate job at training people in "thinking strategically," as was done from Pearl Harbor through the early days of the Cold War and then again in its immediate aftermath. Not long thereafter, the US foreign policy establishment disarmed intellectually even more than the US reduced its physical sinews of power.

An early barometer will be whom Biden appoints to foreign policy and national security positions – and not just at the cabinet level, but also several layers down; and whether this includes a capacity for strategic thinking, not just tactics. As of now, the jury is very much out on this most important score, which would largely determine whether Biden would get off to a good start or soon get the nation into trouble abroad.

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