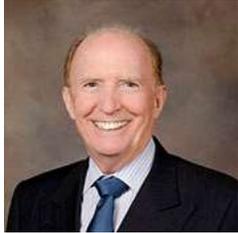


12 November 2020

The Biden Presidency



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Unless, under some most unlikely scenario, President Donald Trump were to get the US Supreme Court to overturn Joe Biden's election as President, the United States can get on with a peaceful handover of power on January 20th. For most Americans this is welcome relief after four years of Donald Trump's disgracing the presidency and America's standing in the world.

Already, the outcome of the election, coupled with what Biden said to the nation afterward, has been a tonic. He has already reached out to those who did not vote for him, and he has an excellent record of brokering deals with both Democrats and Republicans on Capitol Hill. In a phrase, "democracy still works in America," as many of us never stopped believing, despite the rantings of the main stream and social media and the blathering of far too many so-called pundits. Kamala Harris, the first woman (and also person of color) to become vice president, also acquitted herself well in her first formal address after being elected. That should provide comfort to people who have worried about her suitability for that high office – and, indeed, as a possible president, perhaps in 2025.

The Biden transition has begun promptly. Some of the President-elect's pledges are what in America we call "low-hanging fruit." When he becomes President, Biden has promised to reverse Donald Trump's non-legislative Executive Orders and other unilateral actions that do not serve the nation well. Abroad, they include rejoining the World Health Organization and the 2016 Paris Climate Accord, from which the Trump withdrawal has just become final. About the only new such Trump decisions in the domestic arena between now and Inauguration Day that Biden could not promptly reverse would be Trump's issuing of pardons to some of his colleagues, though whether they can be issued preemptively, that is, before indictments, is debated by lawyers. Trump could also find some lower-court vacancies to fill, and the Senate controlled by Majority Leader Mitch McConnell has the votes to ram them through.

More important is the agenda that Biden has set, beginning with the coronavirus. This past Monday he empaneled a distinguished group of experts to propose a course of action. But under the best of circumstances and even if the much-heralded vaccines do prove to work, it will be months before they could be widely available, and Trump still has 10 weeks to continue failing to

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take the crisis seriously. There will almost surely be several hundred thousand new US cases before Inauguration and tens of thousands more deaths, plus more before what Biden is able to do proves effective.

He has also rightly put the economy up with COVID-19 as a top priority. But doing both will be formidable. Already since the coronavirus struck, there has had to be at least a partial trade-off. Closing down major parts of the economy may slow the spread of the virus, but obviously has negative effects – some of them permanent, including on jobs. Trump chose to favor the economy; Biden will have to do both. Striking a viable balance will be his most daunting near-term challenge.

The President-elect has also committed to early efforts on climate change. The goal is exactly right: it is the most serious threat to the world, bar none. But easy answers do not exist. A large fraction of Americans (and others) still do not believe there is a crisis: getting that point across is Biden's climate-change Task One. Rejigging the US economy, if only to go to carbon-neutral energy (just one needed step), will be a project unmatched except possibly by mobilization for World War II -- and that was done in face of palpable national security threats. Nor do the alternatives so far apparent – notably “renewables”-- offer sufficient promise, and the one technology that can produce clean energy in significant amounts, nuclear power, remains deeply unpopular in the United States, and ramping up would in any event take years. Worse, acting alone the US cannot make much of a dent; enlisting EU countries, many of which are already ahead of the United States, is one thing. Even also getting China, India, and Brazil to take radical actions would not be enough. There can be little doubt that dealing with climate change will be the most difficult effort ever undertaken in history. Prospects of enlisting the ecological, economic, social and especially political efforts are still extremely daunting.

Biden thus has to be clear about the nature and difficulty of the undertaking. Before embarking on it, with the risk of going off half-cocked, he needs to have a well-worked-out strategy, both for domestic efforts and international cooperation. Worst would be a premature commitment to act that would end in frustration, popular disillusionment, and failure.

At home, President Biden will need promptly to start tackling the issue of race, so often raised in modern US history and then driven back down toward the bottom of national priorities. Not this time, not just because of Black Lives Matter, but in recognition that minorities have played a disproportionate role in keeping the health care and service economies going in the face of COVID-19. This is a work of decades; but Biden will have to get it going rapidly. So too, though not all at once, he will have to start addressing outdated infrastructure, health-care financing, education at all levels, immigration, and the long process of trying to reduce inequality in American society. As he looks to the election results, he also can't forget needs of people in the so-called Blue Wall states from Pennsylvania through the upper Midwest who supported Trump narrowly in 2016 and Biden this time. “Scranton Joe” must show he remembers where he came from if he wants to succeed with his agenda.

Abroad, there is of course great relief that there will again be a US President who does not question America's commitment to NATO (and to friends and allies in the Pacific), who can be relied on not to "spit in the soup" at international gatherings, and, when appropriate, will restore the United States as a global leader. He is a multilateralist and will make that clear wherever he goes.

But all will not be coming up roses from the perspective of foreign friends. He will follow his predecessors' lead in asking allies in Europe and Asia to bear a larger share of common defence burdens. He will also face domestic pressures to reduce the downsides of globalization, to repatriate a good deal of production (and jobs), and to take a hard look at supply-chain vulnerabilities. (Of course, he will face resistance from parts of the US private sector. By contrast, he can be expected to rejoin the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) -- partly as a counter to Chinese regional influence -- and to reenter negotiations on the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP). But he will be a tough bargainer on trade and is unlikely to accept agreements that don't clearly benefit the United States, especially workers. In the mix, Britain's Boris Johnson must now be wondering whether he was wise to become so close to Trump. Thus on Britain's desire to offset Brexit with a major trade deal with America, London won't find smooth sailing. As one indicator, leaders of the Democratic Party have already served notice that a trade deal with the UK will depend, as a first step, on fair treatment for Ireland on Brexit negotiations with the EU. This includes fully respecting the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, as Biden reiterated his week. In general, the UK will have to earn continuation of the Special Relationship.

There are three major areas where the Biden approach may not be that much different from Trump's, for good or ill from others' perspectives. First is the Middle East. Biden will almost surely not take back the gifts that Trump gave Israel, such as moving the US Embassy to Jerusalem and tolerating both Israel's declaring sovereignty over the Golan and a major expansion of Israeli settlements on the West Bank. There will be no US Israeli-Palestinian peace initiative, at least not for some time. The US will not change course in Afghanistan, where the deal with the Taliban is just a fig leaf to delay the time before it retakes control. There is no stomach among Americans for staying. (Notably, Trump did not start any new wars in the Middle East, though he did continue countering the Islamic State and kept the United States linked to Saudi ambitions in Yemen -- one place in the region where Biden is committed to changing course.)

On Iran, Biden has said that he would like to reopen a dialogue, rejoin the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) on the Iranian nuclear program, from which Trump withdrew in 2018, and work with Iran on some other US concerns. In his campaign rhetoric, he did condition this process on Iran's taking the first step by ceasing to violate the terms of the JCPOA (which is also a condition imposed by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.) Further, some leading members of Biden's entourage oppose any change of course on Iran. For their part, the Iranians have talked about getting the JCPOA back on track but -- no surprise -- they have demanded that the US take the first step. Meanwhile, Pompeo, who has his own presidential aspirations, is likely to impose even more sanctions on Iran between now and the Inauguration, despite their already crushing the Iranian people, in order to make it difficult in US domestic politics for the Biden administration to

walk them back and thus to increase chances for a dialogue with Teheran – which is precisely Pompeo’s objective.

Russia and China will pose problems for the Biden administration that are at least partially similar to one another. Both countries are increasing their power and ambitions. Russia is clearly the lesser concern of the two for the United States, since its challenges are focused primarily on one region (though it is Central Europe), with a sidebar in parts of the Middle East and Transcaucasia, rather than globally; and it does not have the makings of again becoming a superpower. Biden has said he will seek with Russia to renew the New Start nuclear arms treaty which expires next year. But broadening the agenda would come up against strong domestic political opposition, in both parties. It is not just what Russian president Vladimir Putin did in seizing Crimea and continuing a mostly-proxy war in other parts of Ukraine (the US role in helping to cause this problem has been conveniently forgotten). There is still the domestic political overhang from the 2016 election, where Russia’s supposed interference was used by Democrats to explain why Hillary Clinton lost (not credible) and also as a cudgel to try getting rid of Trump (it failed.) But despite this domestic political environment, Biden will have to realize that Russia is here to stay and, in some way, must be dealt with and not just through containment or – God forbid – a new cold war. It is too much to hope that the time of promise in Russian-West relations of the 1990s can be regained, but the United States and the West can’t in their own interests permit a continued drift toward confrontation without a college try to do otherwise with the Russians, while protecting Western interests.

A similar American cast of mind applies with regard to China, the “elephant in the room,” whatever its ambitions in terms of military buildup, economics, politics, and trying to define the future of global relations. It is also the first country with a serious capability for challenging the prevailing “America as number one” attitude that still largely dominates US politics and self-definition. Biden’s positions on China are not all that different from Trump’s, but they will need to be, in America’s interests. A first step needs to be to bring together the different strands of US “China policy” – the Pentagon’s view, non-proliferation (North Korea), human rights, environment (climate change), and the US private sector’s interests, among other perspectives. Regarding Europe, this internal US “dialogue” is decades old. It doesn’t yet exist regarding China; Biden will have to get it going.

Concerning the United States’ role in the world and that role’s relationship with domestic matters – “strong at home to be strong abroad,” morally and politically as well as physically – Biden now needs to choose people for his foreign policy and national security team who have the capacity to “think strategically” and to relate to one another different regions and functions, plus different tools of power and influence. It is not clear that Biden will do so; indeed, since early in the post-Cold War period, the United States has been allowing these capabilities to atrophy. Further, Biden needs to steer clear in his senior-level appointments from people who have pre-existing agendas that are likely to differ from his own: a traditional problem for new presidents. An early clue as to Biden’s chances of success in foreign policy will be seen in whom he selects for his team, not just at the cabinet level but also two-three levels down. Indeed, unless he gets this right, much will prove difficult if not impossible to achieve in foreign policy.

The foregoing is not intended to be Mission Impossible. On the plus side are President-elect Joe Biden's character, attitudes, and experience. It's also important to recognize that the nation is not as divided and fractured as the American media and social media would have everyone believe. That's their business model. There still is a core of "Americanism" as Biden knows and spoke to since the election. He is also committed to and adept at in reaching across the aisle with Congress, which was poorly done in the last few administrations.

As an added point for my European audience, drawing on what Barack Obama once said: anything the United States wants to do in the world, it is better off doing it with its North Atlantic allies and partners and not alone. President-elect Biden clearly subscribes to that maxim.

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