

Essay

The Contours of Biden's Foreign Policy

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Speaking at the Munich Security Conference on 19th February 2021, President Biden outlined the framework of his administration's foreign policy in the following words,

"... building back better our economic foundations; reclaiming our place in international institutions; lifting up our values at home, and speaking out to defend them around the world; modernizing our military capabilities while leading with diplomacy; revitalizing America's network of alliances and partnerships that have made the world safer for all people."¹

Biden, as Vice President during Obama presidency and as Senator of long standing, has a well-grounded view of America's foreign policy of several administrations spanning four decades. He represents continuity in American thinking which perceives America as a world leader. In his article in *Foreign Affairs* in March-April 2020² Biden had dealt extensively with what ailed America under Trump and how the problems should be addressed. He accused President Trump of diminishing US credibility and influence in the world, undermining US allies, emboldening US adversaries and squandering the American "leverage to contend with national security challenges from North Korea to Iran, from Syria to Afghanistan to Venezuela, with practically nothing to show for it."³

Biden's Liberal Vision

Biden held Trump responsible for abdicating "American leadership in mobilizing collective action to meet new threats, especially those unique to this century.." and turning away from "the democratic values that give strength to our nation and unify us as a people."⁴ He observed: "Meanwhile, the global challenges facing the United States— from

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climate change and mass migration to technological disruption and infectious diseases—have grown more complex and more urgent, while the rapid advance of authoritarianism, nationalism, and illiberalism has undermined our ability to collectively meet them.”⁵

Stemming the tide of authoritarianism and populism sweeping the world is among his key concerns. Rejecting Trump’s transactionalism, Biden is injecting a note of idealism in the US foreign policy. He wrote, “Democracies—paralyzed by hyper partisanship, hobbled by corruption, weighed down by extreme inequality—are having a harder time delivering for their people. Trust in democratic institutions is down. Fear of the *other* is up. And the international system that the United States so carefully constructed is coming apart at the seams.”⁶ Promoting democratic values across the world is turning out to be the leitmotif of Biden’s foreign policy.

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Biden continued to follow these themes throughout his election campaign. They form the bedrock of the emerging foreign policy of his administration. Regaining American supremacy is at the heart of Biden’s foreign-policy agenda. The tagline of Biden foreign policy is that “America is back”. This implies rebuilding alliances, restoring the credibility of America’s foreign policy, promoting democratic values, focusing on the 21st-century problems of climate change, health and pandemics, as well as the consequences of technological disruptions. Biden is looking to handle these challenges not alone but in cooperation with allies and strategic partners.

Biden is aware that for America to be able to meet the new challenges, the domestic problems must be addressed. He sees a clear link between foreign policy and domestic issues. He has openly said that his foreign policy will be for the ‘middle classes’. He sees himself as the healer of the deep divide within American society. He perceives the need to reverse the declining competitiveness of the American companies, build more efficient and modern infrastructure, and make greater investments in education, health and research, and development. Unless this is done, America cannot regain its global supremacy.

Biden lays great emphasis on repairing the alliance system which the US had created after the Second World War. Addressing the Munich Security Conference virtually on 19th February, Biden reiterated the importance of the transatlantic partnership between the US and Europe, characterising it as the “cornerstone of all we hope to accomplish in the 21st century.”⁷ His words were meant to assure the key allies of America’s sincerity to reengage

with them after the tumultuous four years of Trump. President Trump had damaged the US alliance system by adopting a confrontationalist approach and even imposing sanctions on friends and allies. He saw multilateral engagements as a burden. He took America out of the Human Rights Council and the World Health Organisation (WHO). He also withdrew from the Paris Climate Change Agreement and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action on the Iranian nuclear programme, which the US had helped negotiate. Biden is reversing all of that. But geopolitics is unkind. Sentiments do not matter. Hardnosed policies do. The world will watch what Biden does and not what he says. The fact is that Trump's policies had considerable traction within US society.

Dealing with China

Biden faces the same challenges which Trump faced. These include dealing with China, which is seriously challenging America's technological, economic and military superiority. China has made deep inroads into Europe through its Belt and Road Initiative. Europe does not see China in the same way as the US does. In a consequential move, the EU concluded an investment agreement with China days before Biden's inauguration, signalling its desire to engage with China whom Biden sees as authoritarian. China has global dominance over rare earth materials which are critical to the high-tech industry in the West. The resolution of the North Korean nuclear problem is not possible without China's cooperation. The US ability to reverse Chinese expansionism in its neighbourhood will be tested. China has captured the disputed islets in the South China Sea in violation of international norms. The international community has so far watched helplessly. China also tried to change the Line of Actual Control on India's northern borders. Fortunately, India has stood firm and China was compelled to vacate the territory in the Pangong So lake area in Ladakh after long-drawn negotiations. China is also putting enormous pressure on Taiwan, and its oppression in Xinjiang and Tibet has increased. The US, as the leading global power, will have to find a way of dealing with Chinese expansionist tendencies.

China is now the world's second largest military with considerable achievements in space, nuclear, cyber and maritime domains. Its Made in China programme is a direct challenge to US technological superiority, and to Europe and India. China has used the Belt and Road Initiative to enhance its global footprint and influence. In contrast, the US has failed to come up with matching plans which would attract the developing and the developed world. The US needs to realise that remaining *numero uno* comes at a cost to the American taxpayer. Trump was not willing to raise taxes. He saw US engagements abroad as a burden on the taxpayer. For him, multilateralism was a waste of time. He wanted others to share the burden with the US. Biden is pursuing a different approach. But will

he be able to invest in building US influence abroad? What strategies will he adopt? Will the US bear the cost of hegemony? That remains to be seen. Biden is aware of China's real nature but the strategy to deal with the challenge is yet to unfold. By participating in the meeting of the Quad foreign ministers in February 2020, the US has signalled that it supports Trump's policy of Free and Open Indo-Pacific. So, there is likely to be continuity in this area.

In building the post-Second World War order, the US undertook wide-ranging security commitments in different parts of the world. These commitments have imposed heavy costs on the US. Obama and Trump both sought to reduce US global commitments although they followed different strategies. The US-Taliban agreement signed in 2020 provided for the complete US withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan by May 2021. Biden administration is reviewing that agreement. It is not clear yet whether the US will withdraw its troops entirely by the promised date. Biden's Afghanistan policy

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will be a major signal of how the US wishes to treat its global security engagements. Biden knows that US commitment abroad cannot be reduced altogether as this would diminish US influence further. He has put a stop to the withdrawal of US troops from Germany. A comprehensive policy on global security commitments

has yet to emerge.

The US is willing to cooperate with China on global issues like climate change. The Chinese communist party leadership has laid out a clear programme of economic, technological and military progress over the next 30 years. Biden realises that unless the US builds its own capabilities, it will not be able to meet the China challenge. Biden's China policy is likely to have a mixture of competition and cooperation.

Negative Perception of Russia

Biden is extremely negative on Russia. He sees Russia and Putin from the democracy lens. He has described Putin as an autocrat. Although the US and Russia have agreed to extend the New START treaty for another five years without negotiations, the prospect of US-Russia cooperation is not very bright. The tensions between Russia and the US are likely to continue. Trump was softer on Russia than Biden is.

One should expect the Biden administration to come up with a new national security strategy, a nuclear posture review and a defence strategy. This will indicate how realistic will be the new administration's security policies. Biden's South Asia policy will

be watched with great interest. Emboldened by Biden's election, Pakistan is hoping that the new administration will adopt a softer attitude towards it. Biden is the recipient of Pakistan's highest civilian award in the past. It remains to be seen how Biden views Pakistan – through the prism of Afghanistan or that of terrorism.

In the past, Biden has regarded India as an ally in America's rebalance to Asia. India is an indispensable part of the US Indo-Pacific policy. While the fundamentals of Indo-US relationship are strong, there are likely to be some issues which both sides would need to resolve. Given the fact that the defence cooperation between India and the US has emerged as the linchpin of Indo-US relations, it is expected that bilateral relations will progress well under Biden despite some irritants like those on trade and investment, human rights, democracy, etc. Further, India and the US can be credible partners in dealing with the challenges of the new world, such as climate change, health security, free and open Indo Pacific, clean energy, technology cooperation, and skill building. The economic potential in the bilateral relationship is enormous and still untapped. Both sides would need to take fresh initiatives to tap the unrealised potential in the economic and technological area.

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Democracy and Human Rights

In his public utterances, Biden has made it clear that democracy and human rights will be high up in his foreign-policy agenda. He has promised to call a summit of democracies. This is his way of signalling that democracies should come together to put pressure on authoritarian regimes. It is not clear who will be invited and who will be kept out. If democracy is the criterion then some of the US's key allies in the Middle East will have to be left out of the party. Many US allies are not exactly democracies. Even in the past, the Democratic administrations have supported autocratic leaders. It will not be possible for the US to take a holier than thou attitude considering what happened in the US in the wake of the presidential elections when Trump-inspired undemocratic elements tried to take over and disrupt Capitol Hill. How democracy and realism will go together in Biden's foreign policy remains to be seen.

Climate Change is emerging to be Biden's key foreign policy priority. He has appointed former Secretary of State John Kerry as his special envoy on climate change issues. Biden has indicated that he would call a summit meeting to discuss climate change. But the question is whether the US will set an example by reducing its own emissions.

The US is by far the largest emitter of greenhouse gases in the world. Will the US take the leadership in providing funding and technological assistance to the developing countries that are struggling with the problem of development and overcoming poverty?

Pressing Domestic Priorities

Before Biden does anything substantial in the foreign policy arena, he needs to bring the raging coronavirus epidemic under control. Thanks to the inept handling of the coronavirus crisis, the US has already lost over half a million lives. The loss in life exceeds that in the First World War, the Second World War and the Vietnam War put together. Biden has proposed a USD 1.9 trillion programme under the American Rescue Program to Congress, which is under consideration. He has announced USD 4 billion in aid to Covax, the international organisation run by the WHO for distributing vaccines to the developing world. Thus, the Biden administration is showing commitment to global cooperation to fight the pandemic, apart from addressing the domestic requirements of the vaccine.

Biden is aware that a lot of work needs to be done at home before America is seen as a model for other countries. The snowstorm in mid-America has exposed once again that the American resilience to deal with large scale natural disasters is limited. Its infrastructure is old and rusted. Biden has emphasised that America must build modern infrastructure. Citing the Chinese example, he has urged greater investments in infrastructure. As a candidate, Biden in July 2020 had promised to spend USD 2 trillion over four years on clean-energy infrastructure. He wants to boost electric vehicles and high-speed rail. Studies show that half of US roads and a third of the bridges are in poor condition and require repairs and rehabilitation. Trump had also promised but failed to deliver higher infrastructure spending. Biden hopes to unveil a USD 2 trillion plan. But large funding issues get embroiled in partisan politics in Congress.

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Biden has a strong idealistic approach to the world but is not unaware of the need for realism. He will have to find a proper mix of idealism and realism in his foreign-policy approach. While the contours of Biden's foreign-policy are emerging, the nitty-gritty is yet to evolve. Having served in the Obama administration as the Vice President, Biden is likely to reactivate some strategies of that era. Yet, he faces many new challenges which were not there. A lot of Biden's time is likely to go in addressing the domestic issues which have impacted US capabilities and image. The task of regaining US supremacy and sustaining it is not going to be easy.

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