

European issues
n°580
12th January 2021

The Biden transition



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During the grotesque years of the Trump administration, and after its extraordinarily contested departure, the admittedly romantic idea of the United States has turned into a thing of the past—no longer the do-good democracy it used to be, but now a country unpredictably reactive rather than preventive, vindictive rather than proactive, and exclusive rather than inclusive. In June 2020, the nation's pride reached a 20-year low, with only 42 percent of the respondents "extremely proud" to be American, down from 69 percent in 2003. And according to a Wall Street Journal poll, four Americans in five found the country "out of control." By year's end, aberrant talk that military force might be used, and martial law imposed, for a targeted "rerun" of the election was historically unreal but left many afraid about the future of the nation. When votes which have been counted no longer count, integrity is dismissed, character no longer matters, alternative facts are deemed real, and feeling right takes precedence over being right, then there is nothing left to hold on to. As Bertolt Brecht sarcastically suggested in 1953—time "to dissolve the people and elect another."

Throughout, the world has watched in dismay. For much of the previous century, America was the country much of the world came to rely on for its promises, a country that not only counted but one that could be counted on decisively. But now, the trust is gone: wrote former Secretary of State George Shultz on his one hundredth birthday, "a belief that what [our] nation ... commits to do will, in fact be done" and what it "says will happen is, in fact, capable of being done." A September 2020 survey by the Pew Research Center in 13 nations, all wealthy democracies, showed America's reputation and over all

confidence in its president in steady decline, often at their lowest points since these surveys began twenty years before—with more confidence in Xi Jinping (19 per cent) and Putin (23 per cent) than in Trump (16 percent). Such findings have been repeated since—*en pire*.

HALF PAST TRUMP

In November 2016, a minority of American voters elected an imaginary candidate born out of a vulgar novella co-written by a third-rate Russian author. Enthusiastically narcissistic, historically blind, pitifully inconsistent, shamelessly uninformed, congenitally un-factual, disrespectfully laughable, needlessly provocative, and dangerously unpredictable, Donald J. Trump was unsuited for the job and unfit for the idea Americans have of the presidency, and the world of their nation. As a result, for four years, Trump's post-rational, post-factual, a-historical, uncivilized, and un-American American leadership threatened to launch a transformational era with the subversion of our institutions, the degradation of our values, a distasteful outreach to autocrats, indifference to statecraft, shameless bigotry, and distorting simplification of the national interest. As such, the Trump presidency was a wake-up call for Americans and their belief in a more perfect union; but it was also a wake-up call for a world which might still need its leadership for its intent and efficacy.

When Gerald Ford announced the end of "our long national nightmare" in August 1975, after Nixon's resignation—the first ever—his next sentence was telling: "our Constitution worked," he claimed. In December 2020, that claim can no longer be made.

The Biden transition

Consider: Biden won the popular vote by more than 7 million votes, but nearly 75 percent of all Republican voters and a large majority of their representatives in Congress claimed otherwise. No less troubling, a switch of 45,000 votes in three states—Wisconsin, Georgia, and Arizona—would have produced a tie in the Electoral College, and a likely win for Trump with the constitutionally-mandated vote in the House of Representatives, where California's 40 million-plus people would have had equal weight as Wyoming's population of 600,000 people. At least, in 2020, Americans voted in large numbers, with the highest turnout (66.2 percent) in over a century. But even their eagerness to vote and their reaction afterward confirm that America is broken—one nation but two countries that do not like, trust, understand, respect, or resemble, or know each other.

It's the voters, stupid: foreign policy begins at home, and for the Biden administration to reset relations with the allies, manage adversary relations, re-engage international institutions, and restore the relevance of diplomacy—America will need to be made whole again, or at least get the process started during his moment of presidential transition. There is what Martin Luther King called "the urgency of the moment." Biden cannot afford Roosevelt's slow-moving New Deal, which was still showing a 17.2 percent rate of unemployment in 1939; nor can he even afford the two years it took Reagan to bring America back. Lacking the luxury of time, he starts as the captive of never-Bideners and never-Trumpers who will battle through the 2022 midterm elections and until the 2024 post-Biden presidential blind date with his successor. In January 2020, Trump's coup failed; but his secondary objective, which was to derail the Biden administration and deny its legitimacy worked, and it will be some time before it can be regained.

Despite his presidency's institutional destructiveness, Trump's post-mortem can start with the recognition that he is the first American president since Carter who did not start a new war abroad, even though he may have given it a try in Iran. No less consequentially, however, he did not end any either, even though he tried hard, in Afghanistan especially. Setting aside

Trump's personality, style, results, and unpredictability, he nonetheless opened new perspectives in several core security areas, some of which might profit his successor.

In the Middle East, widely viewed prior to his election as the new Global Balkans, Trump transformed the region's diplomatic map and expanded the areas of permissible changes as he challenged most fundamentals of the past 50 years. In North Korea, he held two unprecedented Summit meetings with a diplomatic pariah for nearly 70 years. In China, he de-normalized a U.S. strategy that had indulged its ambitions in and beyond Asia for over three decades. In Europe, his belligerence argued for a more united and autonomous post-pandemic and post-Brexit European Union. In Russia, he paradoxically exposed the need for a reset on such vital issues as arms control, the Middle East, Europe-East, and cyber—despite Putin's increasing malfeasance. In Latin America, his re-branding of NAFTA into a so-called USMC restored a neglected priority interest in the Western Hemisphere—Americas-First.

In all instances, taboos were broken although, admittedly, at a price, which Biden will also have to assume, thus adding to the urgency of a new beginning: risks of a serious confrontation with Iran, civil wars of de-territorialization in the Middle East, North Korea's stronger and more actionable strategic arsenal, more nuisance from Russia at its periphery, more illiberal regimes in Latin America and Europe, Chinese-sponsored, de-Westernized trade arrangements, fewer rules-enforcing multilateral institutions, new or deeper instabilities in Africa, and so forth.

The transactional methods Trump used unilaterally simply did not fit the issues, the interlocutors, and the moment. Nor did Trump assemble the team and manage the process required for the high-stake diplomacy needed as he proved to be a high consumer of personnel: two secretaries of State, three Defense secretaries, four national security advisers, and so forth—most of these changes, downgrades relative to their predecessors and none with adequate subcabinet level and staff appointees. Entering a new year, this one thing at least is known: Biden's agenda may not

be his own, but he will be the better man and have a better team to address it better.

A QUARTER BEFORE BIDEN

Expect a one-term Biden presidency to change things, then—but not too quickly and not too much. To each president his new beginning: Eisenhower's New Look, Kennedy's New Frontiers, and Johnson's Great Society—all revisited by Nixon's Silent Majority until they turned into a "national nightmare" which Ford ended and Carter transitioned until Reagan vowed to bring America back. And, with the Cold War over, there was Bush-41's promise of a New World Order, neglected when Clinton insisted on "the economy, stupid" before Bush-43 fought a mythical axis of evil and Obama insisted that "yes, we can," which Trump translated into Making America Great Again. Now, all these slogans apply for a deeply fractured nation that needs to be made whole again at home and regain its good name abroad.

A known quantity, Joseph E. Biden is no Trump but, more significantly, he is neither of the two previous one-term presidents. For one, he is no Carter,² meaning, a president-in-a-hurry rushing into everything at once, with Nixon serving as anti-model, like Trump will for Biden. Instead, Biden enters the White House with the political experience Carter lacked and which no other modern president since Johnson has matched. Unlike Carter, too, Biden also knows History, which he has lived intimately more than any of his predecessors since Bush-41, another rolodex president who knew everyone and built a cohesive and experienced team who knew and liked him, as well as each other, like Biden did: this is not Obama's team of rivals but a team of friends, disciples, and staffers. But unlike the vision-free Republican president whose main role was to carve Reagan's transformational place in history, Biden is no Bush.² either—meaning, a deferred virtual third term for Obama—because his role is not that of a closer but that of a starter who needs early wins to avoid falling behind and make room for a successor—which he hopes to be his Vice President—worthy of an American history temporarily by his predecessor.

Everything known about Biden points to America's alliance with Europe as his priority. The most Atlanticist president since the Cold War, he is well acquainted with the EU as a *pas de trois*, now minus one after a Brexit which he privately questioned and will not now reward. A well-disposed EU-conscious president as well, Biden shares Europe's preference for nonmilitary instruments of power, as well as an inclusive take on world order and its global agenda. Trump withdrew from 13 international agreements, agreements, and treaties, and Biden's early reversal on most of these will be Euro-pleasers designed to re-assure allies and re-engage adversaries: a quick return to the Paris Climate Accord, with the goal of a Paris II treaty by 2025; a re-launch of the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran, with an enlarged framework for additional negotiations; a restored commitment to the World Trade Organization, with a new Director-General and judges for its dispute mechanism, less use of unilateral tariffs and other economic sanctions, and more. Used to a Senate-bred discursive culture of compromises, Biden accepts the need for consensus-building consultation before decisions are made, whether for ongoing conflicts (in Afghanistan and Iraq—in together, out together), conflict resolution (in post-Soviet Europe and elsewhere), arms control talks with Russia, and troop levels deployment (in Germany and elsewhere, like South Korea). Finally, expect more from Biden on other post-national issues like refugees (which Trump reduced from 85,000 to 12,000 a year), human rights and humanitarian aid, and post-pandemic issues in the lower and low middle-income economies.

That may prove reassuring at first, but it is not conclusive—a bit on the cheap and at the mercy of events, whether a new crisis or the next election. (Remember the Kyoto Protocol signed by Clinton in 1998 but not ratified by the U.S. Congress before George W. Bush backed away from it and Obama returned to some version of it.) At heart, Biden's vision of the U.S. role in the world is minimalist, meaning, he wants to do less and hopes to avoid doing more, which is why some of his critics, like Obama's two Defense Secretaries often clashed with him on foreign policy and security issues. Thus, rebooting alliance relations, with the NATO allies, as well as Japan, South Korea, and

others, is not an end by itself but it is meant to redirect adversarial relations within an institutional order that is no longer exclusively dependent on American power and leadership. Biden à la Nixon, if you will.

DON'T PROVOKE BUT DON'T INDULGE

Like presidential candidate George McGovern's "Come home, America" in 1972, Trump's call for "America First" in 2016 was always a slogan, never a strategy. The United States is preponderant in most dimensions of power, and retirement is no more an option now than it was 75 years ago. Yet even a peerless power cannot stay alone for long. When Clinton left office, the U.S. share of GDP was 32 percent; at half past Trump in 2018, it had fallen to 24 percent; past Biden, in 2025, it is expected to drop below 15 percent—that says it all: willingly or not, we are all multilateralists now. To respond to this relative American decline, the Cold War model is obsolete—no more of the me-Tarzan-you-Jane perennial dialogues. Now, countries combine power *and* weaknesses. For allies, this means complementarity—partners that complete each other, with none among them, nor any of the institutions to which they belong, able to do it all alone—NATO, for example, inadequate as a universal social worker, and the EU insufficient as a global security provider. As to adversaries, this means an evaluation of their capabilities, military and otherwise, but also of their vulnerabilities, demographic and otherwise.

Don't focus too much on Biden, therefore, because America, too, must count on Europe and other allies to assume a role commensurate with its capabilities and interests in regions which it is especially well-suited to address—in some main former imperial enclaves or its Eastern neighborhood relative to other Great Powers, and over global "soft" issues like climate change or refugees. That role can vary—mediator, umpire, point guard, pivot, and just bench player or even cheer leader—but in all instances it will be assumed more effectively as a Union rather than one country at a time: "deconflictionary" when matters threaten to get out of hand, representational when the U.S. absence threatens to leave the West out or down, and participatory when all hands are needed.

QUI FAIT QUOI, JACQUES CHIRAC USED TO ASK. FIVE CRITICAL AREAS HAVE PRIORITY ATTENTION FOR COMPLEMENTARY ACTION.

First, there is Russia: Admittedly, a post-Trump reset will not be easy. Of the current heads of state and government, Putin is one of the least known to Biden—during the Obama presidency they met only once, and for the past four years Putin was denied the bilateral summit which he had hoped to hold with Trump from day one. There is a need for Europe to help break the ice, so to speak, especially at a time when the U.S. Congress will be debating an unprecedented and well-orchestrated Russian cyber-attack, to which Biden has pledged "to respond in kind." Meantime, with growing discontent at the periphery—including Belarus, Azerbaijan, Moldova, and Kyrgyzstan—but also at home, and with unwinnable frozen conflicts—including Ukraine and Armenia, but also in Syria and elsewhere—the costs of Russia's interventions are exploding. Echoes of Brezhnev's ill-fated rise to globalism 50 years ago: geopolitically exposed all around, economically vulnerable to external factors beyond its control, running out of people as well as of resources, and with few capable and willing partners, Russia is a *demandeur* state whose future is with, but not, in the West, including the United States and Europe, and neither in nor with Asia, including China. Expect an extension of Obama's New START agreement and a second look at other arms control treaties abandoned by Trump, as well as a more active diplomacy on Ukraine, *sans* Crimea, linked to a review of the sanction regime but also dependent on a reset of NATO without which any reset with Russia will be less safe.

Second, the continued rise of China as a dual economic and military superpower is nearly certain. Unlike the Soviet Union, which could not match let alone surpass America's superiority, China can. Yet, short-term, the threat from China is less urgent than Russia, and it is premature to imagine a large and U.S. led Western-plus bloc confronting a smaller and China-led Far Eastern bloc in a renewed bipolar structure—"one world, two power," according to some: there is too much disorder in this "one world" for two powers only, and not enough influence in either of these "two powers" for all of one world. Biden's strategy will aim to galvanize Europe and

other countries in the region for an end to a piecemeal approach that delinks the issues and denies coordinated action with an agenda à la carte now seemingly favored by the EU. The Nixon strategy of “normalization” has run its course, and after four decades of one-sided strategic patience, hegemonic expansion faces its own laws of diminishing returns. In other words, this is no longer about the West allegedly “losing” China; it is about China “losing” the West. Expect some interest in rejoining the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and strengthening Obama’s pivot to Asia with new building blocks toward a Quadrilateral entente with Japan, Australia, and India and as a demonstration that there is more to Asia than China, and less to China than Asia.

Third, the Greater Middle East is fragmented, dangerous, and unpredictable although possibly less hostile. The territorial arrangements made at the expense of the Ottoman Empire 100 years ago are void and open to the highest bidders, either from without or within the region. In a region more used to games of dominoes than to Monopoly, Trump’s “deal of the century” was a non-starter, and Biden will thread cautiously over its dead body. The region has been a graveyard for the past four U.S. presidents, as Biden can testify, and he knows well that small things are still what works best in the region. Nonetheless, he will be reluctant to reverse his predecessor’s “big” steps, over Jerusalem and the Occupied Territories, or with the Emirates and Morocco cum the Western Sahara, all which may have left the region in a better shape than it was four years ago. With U.S. troop levels deemed to be about right, expect only a few “small” steps, therefore, like restoring a dialogue with the Palestinians, including the resumption of humanitarian aid and a reset direct dialogue, while waiting for the dust to settle after the next Israeli elections and coordinating strategy with NATO and EU countries.

Fourth, regarding Iran, the time out negotiated by the Obama 5+1 coalition is running out of time. In Iran, on the eve of new elections the mood is defiant as the impact of Trump’s “maximum” sanctions gets heavier, and with the book not yet closed on the elimination of Qasim Suleimani and Mohsen Fakhrazadeh. In Israel, also before yet another inconclusive national election,

Trump’s exit is cause for concern, and fears of a nuclear Iran are no lesser than fears over a war with Iran. How to deal with Iran may be Biden’s most serious test in early 2021, with a potential for confrontation, notwithstanding Biden’s non-interventionist instincts. Admittedly, with time, more sanctions and isolation might eventually work, not only to weaken Iran and its regime but also to expand and deepen the new Arab-Israeli bonds, including Saudi Arabia as a likely next recruit. But the time left before new military clashes erupt is not known, and the threat of escalation is predictably high. Expect, therefore, Biden to move back to the 2015 nuclear deal and urge broader negotiations at the earliest possible time—steps for which European support will help provide some cover.

Fifth, when Obama first met then-President elect Trump, he singled out North Korea as Trump’s most serious security concern. To the latter’s credit, Trump started a diplomatic approach that included two summit meetings with zero results—except for Kim, who gained global legitimacy and enjoyed Trump’s bizarre finding that “there is no longer a nuclear threat” from North Korea. The diplomatic path remains open to Biden but expect some provocative action from an enabled Kim Jung Un—like more nuclear testing or the launch of a new intercontinental missile. That will provide an opportunity to reassure U.S. allies like South Korea and Japan, and even a diplomatic test of China’s availability as a strategic partner in the region. Past the traditional get-acquainted crisis, and a bit of mending with South Korea and Japan, negotiations will likely resume and may include an overdue peace treaty at some point near the seventieth anniversary of the end of the war, in June 2023.

Sixth, remember the early foreign policy crises that diverted or derailed Bush-41 (Tiananmen), Clinton (Somalia), Bush-43 (9/11), and Obama (Afghanistan), and add the unknowns of small events, by definition unpredictable: what form terror will take, and where it will strike next; a global economy in peril, with too little growth, too much debt, and not enough equality; too many loose nukes and not enough balance; a global populist awakening in a richer, older, and darker world with too much inequality; a third industrial revolution

The Biden transition

for which the West and the best of the Rest are globally unprepared while the rest of the Rest falls increasingly behind; one or many slow-moving missile crises, and more, including Trump's underground assault on Biden et al. With all these issues moving at variable speeds and creating evolving priorities, Biden's presidential apprenticeship will not be easy.

"This is an hour of maximum danger," claimed John F' Kennedy in January 1961. Kennedy was primarily thinking of the world, and events proved him to be right, peaking with the nuclear crisis in Cuba 18 months later. Making the "hour" worse for Biden is the addition fact that in addition to facing a world in disarray with

alliances at risk, it is American democracy which is facing its "hour of maximum danger." What a sad post-mortem on a president who had promised to make America Great Again and keep it First in the world.

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