



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات  
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

Situation Assessment | 18 November 2020

# The Biden Administration's Foreign Policy: Key Features and Likely Changes

Unit for Political Studies

## The Biden Administration's Foreign Policy

Series: **Situation Assessment**

18 November 2020

### Unit for Political Studies

The Unit for Political Studies is the Center's department dedicated to the study of the region's most pressing current affairs. An integral and vital part of the ACRPS' activities, it offers academically rigorous analysis on issues that are relevant and useful to the public, academics and policy-makers of the Arab region and beyond. The Unit for Political Studie draws on the collaborative efforts of a number of scholars based within and outside the ACRPS. It produces three of the Center's publication series: Assessment Report, Policy Analysis, and Case Analysis reports. .

Copyright © 2020 Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies. All Rights Reserved.

The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies is an independent research institute and think tank for the study of history and social sciences, with particular emphasis on the applied social sciences.

The Center's paramount concern is the advancement of Arab societies and states, their cooperation with one another and issues concerning the Arab nation in general. To that end, it seeks to examine and diagnose the situation in the Arab world - states and communities- to analyze social, economic and cultural policies and to provide political analysis, from an Arab perspective.

The Center publishes in both Arabic and English in order to make its work accessible to both Arab and non-Arab researchers.

The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies

Al-Tarfa Street, Wadi Al Banat

Al-Dayaen, Qatar

PO Box 10277, Doha

+974 4035 4111

[www.dohainstitute.org](http://www.dohainstitute.org)

# Table of Contents

Biden’s Approach to Foreign Policy	1
Expected Foreign Policy Features under the Biden Administration	2
1. The Palestinian issue	2
2. Iran	3
3. China	3
4. Russia	4
Conclusion	5



Having won the US presidential election, despite Trump's refusal to concede, Democratic candidate and president elect Joseph Biden will be inaugurated on 20 January 2021, facing the difficult task of restoring US credibility and global influence.

## Biden's Approach to Foreign Policy

Biden presented the framework for his foreign policy in an expanded paper he published in *Foreign Affairs* in April 2020, titled: "Why America must Lead Again: Rescuing U.S. Foreign Policy after Trump."<sup>(1)</sup> According to him, the United States is the only country that possesses the military, economic and value system, as well as the ability to mobilize the "free world", to lead the world. But first, the US must regain its credibility and influence among its opponents and allies alike. Biden's approach confirms the end of Trump's chaotic and inconsistent approach to foreign policy and his failure to support basic democratic principles around the world that have led to the decline of the United States' standing, undermined its democratic alliances, and weakened its ability to mobilize to meet challenges. Biden claims that Trump has abandoned allies and shown weakness in front of opponents, undermining the US ability to face national security challenges vis-à-vis North Korea, Iran, Syria, Afghanistan, Venezuela, and others. He also accused the outgoing president of waging unwise trade wars against both friends and foes, to the detriment of the interests of the American people. He also believes that the challenges facing the United States and the world, from climate change and mass migration to cyber threats and infectious diseases, are becoming more complex and urgent, and the next president will have to salvage the US reputation and rebuild confidence in its leadership, to meet the new challenges as soon as possible.

When it comes to defending vital US interests, although Biden stresses that he will not "hesitate to protect the American people, including, when necessary, by using force," he continues that "the use of force should be the last resort, not the first. It should be used only to defend U.S. vital interests, when the objective is clear and achievable, and with the informed consent of the American people." Accordingly, he asserts that his administration will stop support for "the Saudi-led war in Yemen" because it does not fall within the priorities of the United States.<sup>(2)</sup>

Biden believes it is necessary to end the "forever wars" in Afghanistan and the Middle East that have cost the United States "untold blood and treasure", and to focus instead on specific military missions, with small numbers of special forces, and by providing intelligence and logistical support to allied forces to address the threats of Al Qaeda and ISIS. He stresses that the United States is required to focus on combating terrorism, but "staying entrenched in unwinnable conflicts only drains our capacity to lead on other issues that require our attention, and it prevents us from rebuilding the other instruments of American power." He calls for strengthening diplomacy as a tool for leading

---

1 Joseph R. Biden, Jr., "Why America must Lead Again: Rescuing U.S. Foreign Policy after Trump," *Foreign Affairs* (<https://fam.ag/33QH12Y>).

2 "The Power of America's Example: The Biden Plan for Leading the Democratic World to Meet the Challenges of the 21st Century," Joe Biden for President: Official Campaign Website, 11/7/2019, accessed on 17/11/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/2UB9nJh>.



allies through international institutions and alliances, such as NATO, and “strengthening cooperation with democratic partners beyond North America and Europe by reaching out to our partners in Asia to fortify our collective capabilities and integrating our friends in Latin America and Africa.”<sup>(3)</sup> He believes that the United States, under his administration, will return to its role as a leading force in laying the foundations for international relations, drafting agreements, and revitalizing the institutions that regulate relations between states and enhance collective security and prosperity.

## Expected Foreign Policy Features under the Biden Administration

Based on this doctrine, Biden pledges to return to active engagement in important international issues, but this requires, first of all, reforming the relationship with allies, improving the image of the United States and restoring the “power” of its “example”. Hence, his administration will re-emphasize the importance of NATO, as part of its efforts to contain Russia, while insisting on the need for its members to increase their defense spending.<sup>(4)</sup> Washington will also rejoin the Paris climate agreement and the World Health Organization, from which the Trump administration has withdrawn. Biden’s administration will follow a different pattern of relations with the regimes that Washington describes as authoritarian, including Egypt and Saudi Arabia, and there will be a renewed focus on human rights and freedoms. But it is unclear to what extent it will go to champion these values or how will it balance between criticism and pressure in these areas and strategic relations with allies. Will it suffice to reverse Trump’s policy, or will it also learn from the mistakes of the Obama administration? The administration will return to dealing with the Palestinian-Israeli conflict within the traditional US approach based on the two-state solution. Biden will also cancel the Trump signed travel ban for citizens of a number of Muslim countries to the US.

There are four main US policy issues that may be changed under Biden, namely:

### 1. The Palestinian issue

Biden does not hide his absolute bias in favor of Israel, and the special part of his foreign policy program explicitly states “ironclad commitment to Israel’s security,” and the Democratic Party’s national program refused to describe the Palestinian territories occupied in 1967 as “occupied,” despite talk of a two-state solution.<sup>(5)</sup> However, the government of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will find itself faced with a different approach from the one it was used to in the Trump era.<sup>(6)</sup> This includes a return to the traditional US policy that any solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict should be negotiated, based on the “land for peace” equation, and the two-state solution.

---

3 Ibid

4 Biden, Jr.

5 “The Power of America’s Example.”

6 “2020 Democratic Party Platform,” 2020 Democratic National Convention, 31/7/2020, accessed on 17/11/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/3kCX8GB>.



The Trump administration has worked over the past four years to try to resolve the central issues of the conflict such as Jerusalem, refugees, sovereignty, land and settlements in favour of Israel, by imposing a *fait accompli* precluding the need to enter into negotiations with the Palestinians. When the Palestinians refused, Trump punished them by cutting off funding to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees (UNRWA), then halting humanitarian aid to them, closing the Palestine Liberation Organization office in Washington, and working to marginalize them in the context of Arab-Israeli normalization agreements, under the title of “The Abraham Accords.”

Biden will not work to move the US embassy from Jerusalem back to Tel Aviv, but he will reopen the US consulate in East Jerusalem, to return to its role as a channel of communication with the Palestinians. He also opposes the decision to annex lands in the West Bank and build new settlements or expand the existing ones without an agreement with the Palestinians. His administration will reopen the PLO office in Washington. Nevertheless, it may encourage the continued strengthening and expansion of relations between Israel and Arab countries before resolving the Palestinian issue, but not with Trump’s enthusiasm and without blackmail as happened with Sudan, where normalization with Israel was a condition for removing Sudan from the list of states sponsoring terrorism and canceling sanctions, especially in light of the major challenges that the United States is currently facing.

## 2. Iran

Biden has insisted that his administration is ready to reinstate the nuclear deal with Iran if Tehran is willing to abide by its terms and conditions. But he also stresses that it will continue to take a stronger approach to Iran’s other destabilizing activities in the region. He believes that there is a smart way to confront the threat that Iran poses to US interests as opposed to the other one that leads to self-defeat. Although he considers Qasem Soleimani, the former commander of the Quds Force, whom the Trump administration assassinated in early 2020, as a dangerous person, he says that this has reinforced Iran’s determination to evade the strict restrictions stipulated by the nuclear agreement. Biden may have an opportunity to reach a new agreement with Iran, taking advantage of the difficult conditions in Tehran due to the harsh sanctions imposed on it by the Trump administration. But this will not be easy, due to the severe weakness of the agreement’s advocates in Iran given its failure to produce significant improvements. Furthermore, the conservatives are expected to win the Iranian presidential elections scheduled for June 2021.

## 3. China

The relationship with China, as America’s geopolitical rival, poses the most prominent strategic dilemma for any US administration. China is in competition with US economically and technologically, and it threatens US global hegemony while consolidating its control over the South China Sea, continuing to build its military strength, and extending its influence in East Asia and in many



other regions of the world. Under the Trump administration, relations between the two countries deteriorated to their lowest point, and some believe that they have entered a new Cold War phase, especially in light of the escalating disputes over trade, tariffs, piracy of American technology, Hong Kong and Taiwan, and the status of Uighur Muslims, as well as Trump's accusation of Beijing of responsibility for the spread of the Covid-19 virus. But Trump's debates did not weaken China, and the Trump administration abandoning its absolute support for allies in East Asia, and flirting with the leader of North Korea may have strengthened the Chinese position. Meanwhile the trade balance with China has not changed, whatever Trump claims.

Biden does not deny the existence of major challenges in the relationship with China, but he believes that the Trump administration has managed the relationship recklessly. This is because it has isolated itself from its closest allies and partners, such as Canada and the European Union, by launching trade wars with them, just as it did with China, weakening the US capacity to confront and contain China.<sup>(7)</sup> Biden stresses that the United States must be strict with China, but the most effective way to do so is by using a carrot and stick strategy,<sup>(8)</sup> and building a united front of allies and partners of the United States to confront human rights violations in China, while seeking cooperation with Beijing is on issues where interests converge, such as climate change, non-proliferation of nuclear weapons in North Korea and Iran, and global health security. Biden's approach is based on the fact that the United States alone represents about a quarter of global GDP, and when US economic power combines with the economic strength of other Western and Asian democracies, such as Japan and South Korea, China will not be able to ignore more than half of the global economy.<sup>(9)</sup>

## 4. Russia

Biden has always insisted that he will take a more hawkish stance with Russia than Trump, who admred of Vladimir Putin and repeatedly questioned US intelligence about Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election. The Obama administration, in which Biden was vice president, imposed harsh sanctions on Moscow over its annexation of the Crimea Peninsula in 2014. Biden stresses the need to "impose real costs on Russia for its violations of international norms and stand with Russian civil society, which has bravely stood up time and again against President Vladimir Putin's kleptocratic authoritarian system."<sup>(10)</sup> He also believes that strengthening the military capabilities of NATO will be necessary to confront "Russian aggression." Although many observers expected the escalation of tension between Washington and Moscow under the Biden administration, nuclear arms control may be one of the areas for cooperation between the two parties. This is because the

---

7 Ibid.

8 James Stavridis, "A Preview of Biden's Foreign Policy," *Bloomberg*, 8/11/2020, accessed on 17/11/2020, at: <https://bloom.bg/38RvOC9>.

9 "The Power of America's Example."

10 Biden, Jr.



START treaty signed in 2010 expires in February 2021. Biden believes that this treaty is a “an anchor of strategic stability between the United States and Russia.”<sup>11</sup> Therefore, there will not be a return to the Cold War but rather to a more militant policy with Russia and a greater commitment to the security of allies.

## Conclusion

Biden’s goal of restoring the US reputation and confidence among its allies will not be an easy task, as international divisions run deep, and the suspicions of the United States’ allies about an international order centered around them are growing. Many in Europe see close economic relations with China as just as important as those with the United States. Indeed, it is unimaginable to a situation in which Washington today can contain two great powers such as Russia and China on their own, especially in light of European hesitation. Most of all, it will have to tackle the damage caused by Trump to the reputation and credibility of the United States as the most important and longest-standing democracy in the world, and that deep rift in American society and its political institutions revealed by the current presidential elections.

---

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.