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TRUMP 2.0 OR A FIRST BIDEN ADMINISTRATION?

HOW DIFFERENT WORLDVIEWS WILL SHAPE US FOREIGN POLICY

The US president has considerable power over the country's foreign policy. The different worldviews espoused by President Trump and presidential candidate Biden are likely to have an impact on how the most significant foreign policy challenges of the coming years are addressed.

President Donald Trump's world-view in relation to international questions has remained remarkably stable since at least the late 1980s. He has consistently disagreed with the interpretation that the US receives considerable security and economic benefits from its leadership role in the post-World War II international order. Instead, he feels that other states, especially America's allies, have taken advantage of American largesse for decades.

In Trump's world, international relations should be conducted on a bilateral transactional basis. Trump is also adamant that the US must garner more 'respect'

internationally from allies and rivals alike by building military and economic strength, as well as through 'winning' and acting tough. A second Trump administration would therefore most likely see a further distancing of the United States from multilateral institutions, and a continued focus on bilateral 'deals' that accrue short-term benefits for the US. In the realm of security and defence, for instance, the focus on bilateral cooperation would be acceptable for a country like Finland, as long as the United States did not completely halt Euro-Atlantic multilateral cooperation.

Former Vice-President Biden's worldview and foreign policy

is likely to be defined by three core tenets. First, that US leadership is important; American exceptionalism has featured in Biden's thinking throughout his political career. Biden considers that if the US does not lead, someone else will, and in a way not conducive to US interests. If no one leads, there will be chaos, equally detrimental to the United States. Second, according to Biden, good leadership must balance between self-interest and altruism, and adhere to certain universal moral values. The third tenet, and the United States' greatest foreign policy achievement in Biden's view, is the need for a network of allies and partners – likeminded, liberal

democratic states – which undergird a global order and American power.

Hence, on many issues, a first Biden administration would likely mark the ‘restoration’ of America’s traditional pre-Trump international role, but it would not automatically spell a return to Obama-era foreign policy. Although in some cases Biden’s goals are similar to those of his former boss, changes in global dynamics – particularly the rise of geostrategic and geo-economic great-power competition – necessitate different approaches.

While worldviews differ between presidents, there are identifiable US interests and grand-strategic goals that prevail across administrations. Going forward, the US-China relationship looks to become a case in point. The next administration will continue to see China as a serious challenger in terms of trade, and as a growing military power. A more predictable, equitable and stable relationship with China, based on the foundations of the existing global order, is in US interests. Trump and Biden would likely forge different paths to building this relationship, however. Whereas Trump prefers unilateral actions, verbal tirades and tariffs to broadcast strength, Biden would likely opt – together with allies – for an approach that blends confrontation with cooperation.

During his tenure, Trump has made an art form out of lambasting America’s ‘free-riding’ allies and shunning multilateral institutions like the European Union and the WHO, and international treaties like the Paris Climate Agreement and the Iran Nuclear Deal. Biden, in contrast, has expressed a preference for strengthening such frameworks. In particular, he wants the United States to shape the ‘rules, norms and institutions’ of the future international order with likeminded partners and allies, duly returning the country to the general post-World War II foreign policy approach.

For key transnational problems, Biden emphasizes that cooperation must extend to America’s great-power competitors, with no issue more vital than the climate crisis. As Biden writes in *Foreign Affairs*: “The United States must lead the world to take on the existential threat we face – climate change. If we don’t get this right, nothing else will matter.” Biden has made it clear that he would immediately set the US on a course to re-join the Paris Agreement and place it on a path to net-zero emissions by 2050. Another vital issue that Biden wants to address together with competitors, especially Russia and China, is nuclear weapons (including disarmament).

The above examples illustrate that within broad structural bounds the worldview espoused by the next US president will have an impact on foreign policy and the way in which transnational challenges are addressed. For countries that value a functioning multilateral rules-based order, four more years of Trumpian ‘America First’ transactionalism would spell a search for alternative forms of cooperation where the US is only peripherally engaged. Conversely, if the upcoming election results in a Biden victory and majorities for the Democratic Party in both houses of Congress, it is possible that the United States will regain a leadership role in addressing at least some of the issues that threaten all of humanity, be they pandemics, nuclear weapons or climate change.

Transatlantic relations would therefore improve if Biden were elected, as the United States and Europe would again find themselves on the same page, strengthening their relationship based on shared mutual interests. If Trump is elected, the current trajectory of deteriorating transatlantic political engagement is unlikely to be reversed, while cooperation on specific issues – like intelligence-sharing or sanctions against certain individuals – will continue. /