



Prospects for Change and Continuity with President Joe Biden

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Expectations are widespread throughout the world that the election of Joe Biden to the US presidency marks a dramatic change in both US domestic and foreign policy. That belief is based on the pervasive stereotype that Donald Trump's presidency epitomized authoritarian populism at home and a surly unilateralism, if not outright "isolationism," abroad.

Like many stereotypes, such a view of the Trump years contains some elements of truth, but it also includes exaggerated or **inaccurate** features. Joe Biden's presidency undoubtedly will adopt markedly different policies on certain issues. Indeed, some of those changes have already become evident during the initial weeks of his administration.

However, those who assume that Biden will pursue a radically progressive domestic agenda and adopt a foreign policy nearly identical to the one that Barack Obama epitomized are likely to encounter some major surprises.

What Changes are Coming?

There is no question that certain changes are in store regarding a variety of domestic issues. Among the new president's **initial flurry** of executive orders were those that reversed the Trump administration's policies on environmental policy. The United States will **rejoin** the Paris Climate Agreement and **cancel** the Keystone XL oil pipeline—high-priority objectives for environmental groups. Biden also signed executive orders rescinding Trump's restrictive policies, and instead established new protections for **LGBTQ rights**, **abortion rights**, and **immigration**.

All of Biden's steps were consistent with the overall progressive agenda. However, the administration has also signaled that it may propose new legislation to target domestic terrorism. That approach splits the progressive coalition, as some progressives worry about possible abuses of civil liberties — **a fear** that many conservatives and libertarians share.

On the foreign policy front, Biden and his advisers are moving to restore a greater US commitment to international cooperation. In addition to rejoining the Paris Climate Accord, the administration **reversed Trump's withdrawal** from the World Health Organization, and announced that the United States would seek **a five-year extension** to the New START arms

control treaty. Biden's move paid immediate dividends when Vladimir Putin's government confirmed that Russia likewise would **continue to abide** by the provisions of New START.

Biden's administration also pursued conciliatory steps on some other issues. Washington confirmed that it **wants to restore** the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) — the multilateral agreement that had placed limits on Iran's nuclear program. Trump had torpedoed that measure, leading to a **nasty policy split** with the European allies and causing Iran to take steps to escalate its nuclear efforts. Biden's foreign policy advisers and congressional allies also indicated that other changes might be in store with respect to Washington's Middle East policy, including **ending US support** for the brutal war that Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies have waged in Yemen since 2015.

Many Things Will Stay the Same

Nevertheless, one must be careful not to overstate the extent or significance of the likely policy changes. For example, there is no indication that US ties to Israel will diminish; indeed, the new administration made it clear immediately that Washington would abide by the Trump administration's decision to move the US embassy **to Jerusalem**, despite continuing complaints from Arab governments. There is no sign whatever that US economic and military aid to Israel will decrease even slightly.

Other aspects of US policy in both the Middle East and Central Asia also look as though they will continue on autopilot. Despite Washington's willingness to return to the JCPOA, overall US hostility toward Iran remains intense. Similarly, there are no prospects for a significant reduction in US meddling in the **Syrian** and **Afghanistan** conflicts. Indeed, the Biden administration appears receptive to perpetuating those US military missions indefinitely, and is coming under **pressure** from **NATO allies** to do so.

What About US-China Relations?

Biden and his advisers do place high priority in restoring cooperation with America's traditional allies in both Europe and East Asia. However, even that agenda is likely to encounter more difficulties than anticipated. One key objective of the new administration is to enlist the NATO allies in a common front to deal with China. In **remarks delivered on December 28**, Biden stated that "as we compete with China and hold China's government accountable for its abuses on trade, technology, human rights, and other fronts, our position will be much stronger when we build coalitions of like-minded partners and allies to make common cause with us in defense of our shared interests and values."

That quest is likely to fail. Indeed, just two days after the president-elect's comments, the European Union signed a **major investment deal** with Beijing, despite requests from the Biden team to hold off on such a decision. Evidence is even stronger that Washington cannot count on European solidarity with the United States if it comes **to a diplomatic confrontation** with China over human rights or other issues. That point became glaringly apparent last year when the Trump administration failed in its efforts to enlist the European allies for a united response to Beijing's imposition of a new national security law on Hong Kong.

The China issue is perhaps the most graphic case in which Biden's policy — much to the frustration of many U.S. allies — may not differ much from the confrontational approach Trump adopted.

The administration's initial actions regarding Taiwan underscore that point. Not only did Biden **invite** Taiwan's de facto ambassador to attend his inauguration, the first time that occurred since the United States switched diplomatic relations to the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1979, but administration officials have issued several statements emphasizing Washington's "**rock-solid**" commitment to Taiwan's defense.

The United States also dispatched an aircraft carrier battle group **to the South China Sea** as a display of U.S. military power in the region barely a week after Biden took office. The Biden administration may seek to ease the trade war that Trump launched against China, but US policy toward the PRC on the security front looks decidedly uncompromising.

The bottom line is that Joe Biden likely will seek to govern as a slightly left-of-center president on domestic affairs, while delaying or diluting the more grandiose progressive goals, such as Medicare for all and the Green New Deal, and adopting a surprisingly strong "law and order" stance.

His approach to foreign affairs will resemble the policies that the Democratic presidents (Bill Clinton and Barack Obama) who preceded Trump, but with a noticeably more hawkish posture toward China. In short, Biden will not be the architect of dramatic policy change that many of his supporters want or his opponents fear. Instead, he will leave his own distinctive, but generally moderate, mark on policy.

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