

Biden and the World: What a U.S. Presidential Transition Means

Experts from leading global think tanks welcome the prospect of a Biden administration restoring long-standing U.S. alliances and commitments to multilateral institutions. But they anticipate a rocky path toward better global cooperation.

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President-Elect Joe Biden speaks to reporters about efforts to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. Jonathan Ernst/Reuters

Joe Biden's election victory could present a moment of opportunity on a range of issues including trade reform and climate change collaboration, say experts in this Council of Councils global perspectives roundup. However, many of them say that both U.S. and global institutions will be put to the test in the years ahead, in part due to domestic forces.

Biden Can Restore Balance for Democracies

Steven Blockmans, Director of Research, Centre for European Policy Studies (Belgium)

Democracy has been in retreat in many parts of the world. Reports by Freedom House and other watchdog groups show a decline of democratic freedoms for fourteen straight years and a surge in the number of elected authoritarians. The combination of populism and the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the decline of the post–World War II world order. A Biden presidency will help restore a balance of powers and could help reboot globalization.

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Despite many doubts about the U.S. election process, legal challenges, and runoffs that remain, U.S. democracy has survived its experiment with protofascism and will become stronger in the next four years. This is a boon for democratic forces worldwide, especially in Europe. Recent developments have shown that democratically elected leaders will try to use majoritarian rule to curb freedoms, overstep constitutional limits, protect the interests of their cronies, and recycle themselves through seemingly free and fair elections. Even if the Biden presidency is slowed by radical conservatism, it is expected to strike up alliances to shore up America's international role and pressure illiberal and undemocratic leadership in other countries. This is good news for the European Union and its drive to stop the corrosive effects of authoritarian tendencies within the bloc and strengthen rule-of-law mechanisms at the supranational level.

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At the same time, Europeans should not kid themselves into believing transatlantic relations will return to the status quo ante. In all but name, the rallying cry of America First is here to stay. Biden has vowed to prioritize investment in U.S. green energy, childcare, education, and infrastructure over any new trade deals. He has also called for expanded Buy American provisions in federal procurement, which has long been an irritant in trade relations with the EU. A Biden presidency will seek to restore America's status as a constructive presence within multilateral organizations such as the World Trade Organization (WTO) and World Health Organization (WHO). That may go a long way toward restoring faith in some of the pillars of the world order that have been battered by the Donald J. Trump administration's unabashed unilateralism.

The Trump Hangover

Luis Rubio, Chairman, Mexican Council on Foreign Relations (Mexico)

The U.S. founding fathers clearly stated that the United States would be a republic, not a democracy. This distinction has become one of the most contentious elements in American elections and the cause of mockery the world over, particularly in fragile democracies and in countries led by authoritarians close to Trump. Although the media has declared Biden the winner, Trump has not conceded, creating dangerous uncertainty. The election has proved much closer than expected and the primary long-term consequence will be the further erosion of America's greatest asset abroad: soft power. Over the past decade, the United States—promoter of democracy, liberal values, and market economics—has squandered its image and institutions as its politicians abused them and Trump undermined them.

Few nations have been hit as hard by Trump's rhetoric and actions as Mexico. Starting in 2016 with his campaign strategy of blaming “Mexican rapists” for American ills, Trump went on to force changes to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), a vital factor of Mexico's economic growth. He produced a new agreement that, despite establishing rules for economic interaction, undermines the value of NAFTA: legal and political certainty for investors. Forgoing geopolitical considerations critical to its security and even with its closest of neighbors, the United States under Trump has been inward-looking and incapable of understanding long-term trends and consequences. The prospect of four more years of similar policies was not enticing.

How much damage is done between now and Biden's inauguration on January 20 will be crucial to the future of the United States. At stake will be the strength of American institutions, which will almost certainly be tested by Trump's refusal to abide by tradition. “A republic, if you can keep it,” Benjamin Franklin said. The world will be watching, from some places with malicious intent, but most with the hope that the United States will once again prove to be a shining light of democracy and institutional strength.

A More Collegial, but Constrained, Multilateral System

Rohinton Medhora, President, Centre for International Governance Innovation (Canada)

Most of us will not miss Trump's bombast or disregard for convention and traditional allies. Trump, though, did not create the political climate at home or abroad on his own. He was a product of it, and added octane to it. As a losing candidate, he nonetheless garnered 48 percent of the popular vote. And though his administration will soon be history, the global environment and its underlying trends remain. Large swaths of people, particularly in the United States and Western Europe, see themselves as victims of today's globalization and resent it. Authoritarian, populist governments that use this and other reasons to justify their xenophobia remain in power in many countries. Reshoring and decoupling, trends already in progress given the increased prevalence of machine learning and automation, are cemented by the COVID-19 pandemic and the contested ascendancy of China.

Biden has espoused traditional, outward-oriented foreign policy positions. He will bring the United States back into the Paris Agreement. This commitment to sound environmental management, though, could also mean canceling approval for the Keystone XL pipeline, which would deliver more Canadian oil to U.S. markets.

A Biden administration could bring the United States back into the Trans-Pacific Partnerships—now the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership—but almost certainly on the condition that some clauses in the original agreement, which restricted small countries' abilities to boost innovation, be brought back in force. U.S. interests, driven by big technology firms, are not likely to relent in driving home their advantage via bilateral and plurilateral trade agreements [PDF].

The United States will value alliances such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and multilateral institutions such as the WTO more than it has done for the past four years. But given the current climate of indifference to internationalism in the United States and elsewhere, what this means beyond friendlier rhetoric is not clear. For a small, open economy such as Canada, it means weighing the gains from a more collegial, albeit constrained, multilateral system against losses on important bilateral issues. On balance, this is good because rules of the game and stability in bilateral relations and multilateral processes beat the alternatives.

Keeping U.S.-China Strategic Competition Under Control

Yu Tiejun, Vice President, Institute of International and Strategic Studies, Peking University (China)

On the west side of the Pacific, many Chinese closely followed the extended, exciting, and exhausting election process that brought Biden to the stage. Under the Trump administration, U.S.-China relations plummeted in an unprecedented way. After Trump leaves office, what will Biden bring to the U.S.-China relationship?

Because domestic issues—such as fighting the pandemic, revitalizing the economy, and mending social, ethnic, and political divisions—are so urgent, an international agenda may not be Biden's immediate policy priority. Further, in light of the recent bipartisan U.S. consensus on China as a strategic competitor, both the motivation and potential for a change in China policy seem limited.

Nevertheless, Biden has the opportunity to improve, if he chooses, the deteriorating U.S.-China relationship, which is essential not only to the two countries, but also to the world. Without U.S.-China cooperation, international institutions such as the United Nations, the WTO, and the WHO cannot function. Transnational challenges such as climate change, COVID-19, financial-system stability, and nuclear proliferation cannot be managed. It is also more difficult to coordinate regional security issues in Afghanistan, Iran, and North Korea.

Even in these arenas where interests overlap, it is not easy for the United States and China to cooperate. A seemingly accelerating power shift, an exaggerated ideological competition, a securitization of economic interdependence and technological innovation, a downward spiral of public opinion, and an increasing psychological anxiety all contribute to the strategic rivalry. Biden is regarded as more predictable and rational, and his national security team will likely be more professional, which could be good news for bilateral relations. But his inveterate policy preference for exporting liberal ideology, human rights, and democratic peace theory could well add to the volatility of bilateral relations. The traditional statecraft of prudence, reassurance, and self-restraint are still essential. If U.S.-China strategic competition is inevitable, both sides need to keep it under control and on the right track, and cooperate whenever possible.

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