

What Lies Ahead for US Foreign Policy After the Elections?

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The November 3 presidential elections in the United States has, sadly enough, progressed along lines many in its run-up had feared. At the time of writing, no clear winner in a surprisingly tight race has emerged. Incumbent President Donald Trump – in an astonishing break with U.S. political traditions – falsely and prematurely declared victory and demanded that the count of mail-in ballots be stopped. Challenger former Vice President Joe Biden earlier in the evening expressed optimism that he will prevail in the end. At this point, it is quite likely that it would take days, if not weeks, for a clear winner to emerge, with the possibility of litigation and possible involvement of the U.S. Supreme Court lurking in the background. There is also fear – not quite unjustified – that the United States may face civil unrest and possible violence in the intervening period. All in all, this has been an election quite in sync with how 2020 has progressed thus far.

But whatever be the eventual outcome, one thing is clear: the forces that led to Trump's victory in 2016 – nativism, xenophobia, and ethnic nationalism – are far from being spent. In fact, the close race indicates that the Republican Party's bet on Trump has paid off handsomely for it. Even if Biden – aided by the U.S. legal system and constitutional checks and balances – does emerge as the victor, and is sworn into office come January, the tallied effect of 2016 and 2020 will bring pause to many, both in the United States and abroad, about the long-term future political trajectory of the country and what that means for U.S. foreign policy in the long run. Increasingly, it seems Trump is not a bug but a feature of U.S. political life.

America's international engagements will likely, and perhaps subtly, be shaped by forces behind the outcomes of both elections. As Council on Foreign Relations President Richard Haass tweeted earlier today, "Whatever the ultimate outcome of this election, this is a deeply divided country along political and cultural lines alike. Bodes badly for governing at home and for building a consensus as to the country's role in the world. Sobering by any and every measure."

Let us start with how U.S. foreign policy over the next four years will look if Trump – one way or the other, using means fair and foul – gets a second term. With his penchant for impulsive decisions and unpredictability, "Trump is the foreign policy and the foreign policy is Trump," as CNN's Jim Sciutto puts it in a new book. But Trump – the former casino owner – may well read his sliding through the White House door again as a sign that his bets, both domestic as well as international, have paid off electorally. This might embolden him considerably going forward.

Concretely, what could that look like? For starters, Trump could amp up his China strategy which, has so far, been a mix of crude economic coercion and military tough talk even when more thoughtful members of his cabinet and national security inner circle has framed it around a defense of a “free and open Indo-Pacific,” or even more grandly, in Reagenesque terms, of defense of a “free world” led by the United States against a patently malevolent Chinese Communist Party.

But Trump can also be extremely impressionable and susceptible to flattery, as North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un as well as Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, among others, correctly intuited in their dealings with him. But hawks in his inner circle may also tap into this vulnerability and make him double down on key areas of political-military contestation with China, but also Russia, including nuclear weapons, the future of arms control or the “appropriate” size of the U.S. military. Military misadventures also become a distinct possibility in this case. But, as has been obvious over the last four years, especially clear from his on-off bromance with Kim, the impulse for Trump to cut a grand bargain, especially around trade, and score another win (in his mind, or more importantly, the minds of his support base) with China cannot be taken off the table without due consideration – assuming his inner circle fails to restrain him.

But Joe Biden has a path to victory too at this juncture, and could very well become the 46th president of the United States. Reams of ink have already been spent of what his foreign policy would like, the gist of it being continued strategic competition with China, but with an added emphasis on the role of alliances and accent on values and human rights – putting the “liberal” back in the quest for a sustained “liberal international order.” But especially if Biden – like his former boss, President Barack Obama early in his first term – seeks to position himself as a bridge between Democrats and Republicans, he is likely to be mindful of the forces that has led to the current close race, and perhaps even accommodating to some of them. Increasingly, it seems former U.S. presidential candidate and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s 2016 description of Trump supporters as a “basket of deplorables” has been a cardinal false assumption, as a momentous role reversal has been underway between the Republican and Democratic parties in terms of their support bases. Biden is likely to factor this in, both in terms of his domestic as well as foreign policies.

In practice, this reckoning will translate to the United States remaining cautious about globalization and free trade. It would also shape other U.S. policies that interface the foreign with the domestic, such as immigration, albeit not to the extent they have determined Trump’s stance on them. However, Biden will have to balance these considerations – which the Democratic Party, as a whole, also needs to factor in for the future – with perhaps a new quest to restore U.S. moral authority in the world, after the chaos of the Trump years. How he would triangulate his foreign policy around realpolitik considerations, changed domestic circumstances, and values that form the bedrock of American exceptionalism remain to be seen.

