**Engaging Biden’s America -Pakistan’s policy options**

[Ambassador G R Baluch](https://dailytimes.com.pk/writer/ambassador-g-r-baluch/" \o "More Articles by Ambassador G R Baluch)

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President Joe Biden takes up the office as the 46th President at extremely challenging times for the world in general and for the US in particular. The Trump era will be remembered as an unprecedented “Era of Great Disruption” in US history with regard to Trump’s domestic policies, which were divisive and polarizing in their impact on the US as a federation and as a democracy as well as in the international arena. Trump’s mishandling of COVID -19 pandemic has resulted in an unprecedented health catastrophe in the US with about four hundred thousand deaths, the highest number of deaths in the world caused by COVID -19.

The domestic divisions brought to fore by the electoral disputes and Trump’s refusal to concede defeat gave rise to an extremely damaging narrative of questioning the credibility of the US electoral process. The subsequent storming of the US parliament by his supporters tarnished the image of the US as a citadel of democracy and global leader of the free democratic world.

The post-election claim and counterclaims became so intense that the very structure of the state was shaken. The  Joint Chiefs of Staffs of the US Army  addressed a letter endorsing the electoral victory of Mr. Joe Biden as the 46th President and the commander-in-chief of the US Armed Forces.  “As Service Members, we must embody the values and ideals of the Nation. We support and defend the Constitution. Any act to disrupt the Constitutional process is not only against our traditions, values and oath; it is against the law” the commanders asserted.

On the Foreign Policy front the US under Trump engaged in a trade war with China which has degenerated into a new cold war between the two superpowers. The US walked out of major International obligations. It withdrew from WHO, and the Paris Climate accord, repudiated a Multilateral Nuclear Accord with Iran. It annulled its NAFTA obligations, and asked Canada, EU, and Middle Eastern countries to pay for the US security umbrella provided to these countries.

***The Biden administration is likely to give priority to freedom of press and human rights and we should put our house in order to avoid any irritants on account of these two issues.***

President Joe Biden’s slogan to “Build Back Better” is centered on addressing domestic governance crises, the first priority being the handling of the coronavirus pandemic and saving American lives, rebooting the US Economy and tackling systemic racism and inequality.

The chaotic and arbitrary Trump presidency was a setback for US Global leadership, on account of the following:

1. Multilateral diplomacy was rejected and replaced by what Trump termed as “America First Policy”. The US withdrew from The Paris Accord on Climate change, disowned the Iran Nuclear Deal, repudiated NAFTA, and withdrew US funding to WHO.
2. Trump’s nationalist policies and his preference for nationalist and authoritarian leaders such as Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Russian leader Putin, Kim Jong-un of  North Korean and ultra nationalist Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi resulted in suppression of human rights and shrinking of space for free speech in these countries.  The US which was once in the vanguard of global efforts to defend rights of minorities and human rights in authoritarian regimes, became a staunch supporter and strategic political partner of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi who took the imprudent step of supporting Trump’s political bid for second term as the US President.
3. A rash of unilateral sanctions on China resulted in disruption of the Global supply chain and a dampening of global trade. The US-China tit for tat trade sanctions escalated into the resurgence of a new cold war and a military standoff in the South China Sea between the two global powers.
4. The tensions in the Middle East escalated due to Trump’s imposition of additional economic sanctions and repudiation of the nuclear deal with Iran.
5. The Muslim world in general and the Arab world in particular witnessed further polarization as Trump forged closer ties with Saudi strong man Crown Prince and UAE leader. He goaded UAE, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco to recognize Israel without a reciprocal peace arrangement for Palestinian people under Israeli occupation.

Mr. Anthony Blinken, Biden’s pick for the post of Secretary of State said “alliances are key to solving the big problems that we face as a country and as a planet” while more urgent repair work will engage President Joe Biden at home the pressing Foreign Policy Challenges in the Complex world cannot wait.

The Pak-US Engagement priority framework should urgently be undertaken with the Biden administration at all levels of the US state and the Government structure.

The Pak-US  Engagement priority framework

Priority Number 1: Peace Building in Afghanistan: During Trump’s presidency; Pakistan – US relations witnessed a strategic convergence in bringing peace in Afghanistan. Pakistan played the successful role of a Strategic Facilitator in opening dialogue between the US and the Taliban; who were designated as terrorists by the US in not too distant a past. Mr. Trump wanted to fulfill his promise of “getting all our boys home” before Christmas that is by December of 2020. The US and Taliban after two years of protracted off the stage and in public negotiations had inched to ink a peace accord. Pakistan with its deft diplomacy played a cardinal role as a strategic facilitator in this process throughout.  For Pakistan, the biggest strategic priority with regard to its relations with the US will be to re-engage the Biden administration on Afghanistan and resume the process of peace building in Afghanistan.

Pakistan’s role as strategic facilitator in opening the communication between the US and Taliban is not a small feat of successful diplomacy. Pakistan must continue to exhibit the diplomatic finesse, in re-engaging the new US state department officials. Pakistan must not slack in leaving the space empty for disruptive forces and its distractors. The Pakistan caucus in US congress was formed some years ago, in which the writer had a humble role as well, in motivating congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee to take a lead role on Kashmir , should be re-engaged and re-energized to continue support and most of recognition of Pakistan’s positive peace building role in Afghanistan. The Prime Minister may be well advised to address a communication to Joe Biden reiterating Pakistan’s continuing commitment to support the Afghanistan peace process.

Unlike Trump, President Biden, a veteran Parliamentarian, is likely to give the lead role to the Congress to guide his efforts to re-establish alliances and repair fatally damaged relations with most of the countries of the world under imprudent isolationist policy of America first. Pakistan Embassy in Washington has to be proactive on Capitol Hill and reinvigorate the Pakistan Caucus. Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee and several democratic Congressmen and women who are positively disposed towards Pakistan should be approached for creating a Pakistan friendly group of US Parliamentarians at the Hill.

Pakistan and US Armies have a long history of close peacetime  and combat cooperation. We should reestablish closer military cooperation  between the two Armies.

The Democrats are known for their support to humanitarian and social causes, Pakistan should forge cooperation for social sector development including US assistance in the Health and Education. Perhaps we could seek US support for establishing research centers for viral diseases to prevent viral diseases in the future.

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