[**Human rights focus**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1606153/human-rights-focus)

[Huma Yusuf](https://www.dawn.com/authors/252/huma-yusuf)Published February 8, 2021

The writer is a freelance journalist.

HUMAN rights may be back on the global agenda. In his first foreign policy speech as president, Joe Biden restored the US emphasis on human rights and diplomacy, referring to crises unfolding in Yemen, China, Russia and Myanmar. Washington’s renewed interest in international human rights will have far-reaching implications — including for Pakistan.

The most notable announcement in Biden’s speech pertained to the end of US support for the Saudi-led offensive in Yemen. US precision-guided munitions have been used in recent years to target civilians and devastate infrastructure, including schools and hospitals. Washington’s policy pivot is long overdue. The conflict in Yemen has created the world’s worst humanitarian crisis, a stain on 21st-century claims to progress. Eighty per cent of the country lives below the poverty line, many are malnourished, and widespread famine threatens. Biden’s reversal of the Trump administration’s decision to designate Houthis as a terrorist organisation will enable the resumption of food and medical aid to Yemen, but the Yemeni people’s suffering will only begin to meaningfully alleviate when the proxy conflict is addressed.

America’s human rights critique of Saudi Arabia, which has begun with the policy shift on Yemen, will continue with the imminent declassification of an intelligence report on the 2018 murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi. The report is expected to point fingers at Saudi Arabia’s crown prince, and its release will increase the momentum for accountability, including potentially some form of targeted sanctions. Such actions will indicate that the carte blanche offered by the Trump administration to autocrats is being withdrawn, and that further violations will carry consequences.

America’s new path will have implications for Pakistan.

We needn’t be naive about the scale of the impact of this renewed interest in the global human rights landscape. The US’s damaged credibility — for example, on racial justice — means that lofty pro-rights rhetoric will lead to calls for the US to address domestic failings first. In our truly multipolar world, repressive regimes will also have the option to distance themselves from the US and instead cultivate other great powers, such as China and Russia, which will continue to have a more lax attitude towards human rights.

But America’s course correct will add impetus to and coalesce the global human rights agenda, which had continued in the Trump era, though in a dispersed fashion, with issue- or region-specific initiatives by the EU, Australia and Latin American democracies. Human Rights Watch has also called for the US to revive the United Nations Human Rights Council, which Trump had abandoned, and re-empower the International Criminal Court.

This matters for Pakistan, even as it circles China’s orbit, in which the national rights record will not be a priority. But as Islamabad seeks to re-engage Washington, it will need to review its approach, ranging from the media crackdown to online surveillance and censorship, arbitrary detentions, disappearances and the persecution of religious minorities. Access for Pakistani exports to certain markets such as the EU will also be contingent on improved human rights (even if they are primarily viewed through the lens of rights violations in trade supply chains).

Biden’s approach toward the Yemen crisis will also have indirect implications for Pakistan’s security and social fabric. The Biden administration intends to rebalance the power equation in the Middle East, by revitalising the Iran nuclear agreement and easing sanctions — contrary to the Trump administration’s approach of joining hands with Gulf states and Israel to isolate Iran.

Efforts to re-engage Iran and slow — or suspend — its nuclear programme, will no doubt lead to a more stable Middle East in the long run. But in the short term, an insecure Riyadh, feeling betrayed by Washington, and an emboldened Tehran, buoyed by Biden’s tone, may fuel regional proxy conflicts. This dynamic in the Middle East always has a ripple effect in Pakistan, manifesting in the form of increased sectarian violence. This fallout will require a renewed effort by the Pakistani state to protect Shias and other religious minorities. Pakistan has several hopes of the Biden administration: slowing the US drift towards India, supporting Kashmir, enabling (or not undermining) CPEC. Islamabad will therefore need to respond to Washington’s change of tone. Recent controversies, such as on the draconian scope of proposed internet regulation that was opposed by the Asia Internet Coalition, comprising predominantly US tech companies, will need a fresh approach.

One wishes that Pakistan would promote human rights because of the moral imperative to do so. But if shifting geopolitics are to be the driver, so be it. A human rights agenda as part of a foreign policy strategy suited to a multipolar world is at least a start.

*The writer is a freelance journalist.*

**Twitter:** [**@humayusuf**](https://twitter.com/humayusuf)

*Published in Dawn, February 8th, 2021*