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**American leadership**

Last week, Joe Biden concluded his first overseas trip since becoming president. He chose to travel to Europe where he met with leaders of the European Union and heads of key Nato allies.

There was much relationship rebuilding that was needed after four years of the previous administration. According to one prominent magazine, “for four years the US engaged in kicking sand into the eyes of key allies.” Biden recognizes the value of important alliances as the US tries to deal with rising threats from Russia and China.

On the last leg of his European trip, Biden met with Russian President Vladimir Putin. There was much to discuss as Russia had openly tried to influence American presidential elections in 2016 as well as in 2020; in both cases trying to tilt the balance in favor of Donald Trump. President Putin, of course, denied any involvement.

Just as the US receded from the global stage under Trump, global conflicts moved into a new phase with proliferation of cyberattacks. Russian-based entities, it is believed, were behind ransomware attacks on US oil pipelines and other civilian infrastructure.

The meeting with Putin went about as well or poorly as could have been expected. Russia has aggressive aims for dominating the region, whether in Ukraine or elsewhere, and the US has little leverage to influence that. Yet, cyberattacks on US entities are a major threat to US national interests. One can safely assume that message was clearly delivered by Biden. One hopes both sides want to avoid a new ‘cold war’ in which tit-for-tat cyberattacks become commonplace.

As Biden works to restore American leadership’s role in the world, the rise of China remains one of his key concerns. However, it is hard to see what exact approach by the US would be effective. The rising economic power of China is a reality. This was evident from the reluctance of European allies to sign on to an anti-China agenda during Biden’s visit. Despite desperate attempts by Trump to block the rise of key Chinese technology companies such as Huawei, it is hard to see what has been accomplished, beyond briefly slowing down some key technologies. In fact, this may have pushed China to strive for greater self-reliance in key technology areas such as manufacture of computer chips. Given this, Biden is focusing on human rights violations by China in Xinjiang and Hong Kong. As concerning as they are, it is easy to see how the Chinese could also point a finger at the US for equally egregious violations in other parts of the world or even internally.

Amid all of this, there is a battle underway to win the hearts and minds of people across the globe. China's ‘Belt and Road’ initiative, much maligned in the US, is resulting in the construction of much needed infrastructure in many developing countries. Yes, some of these projects have gone wrong, but there is much good that has also come from them. Pakistan can point to several examples of highways, railroads and power generation capacity that has been added under these initiatives.

It is estimated that the total cost of all ‘Belt and Road’ projects across dozens of countries is about $1.5 trillion. That is about the same as the expected final cost of one US project – the development of the super advanced F-35 fighter jet. One wonders how useful such an aircraft will be in a world where attacks can be launched sitting at a desktop computer. In the end, how a country spends its resources speaks volumes about its priorities.

While it is hard to find any meaningful development projects in low-income countries that are directly funded by the US., President Biden's announcement that the US will be donating 500 million doses of Covid-19 vaccine to low-income countries is welcome news. Chinese vaccines, on the other hand, are already in use in Pakistan and elsewhere.

Yet, Biden brings much hope and positive expectations for the return of the US as a global leader. He realizes the significance of friendships, principle-based alliances, and soft power. How quickly and whether the damage done to American standing in the world can be reversed remains to be seen.

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