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**Biden’s foreign policy agenda**

In less than three weeks since the inauguration, President Biden has moved fast to articulate the broad contours of his administration’s foreign policy agenda.

In choosing the US Department of State as the venue for the first major presidential address in which he outlined his priorities and preferences in the realm of foreign policy, the US president emphasized the return of a multiagency buy-in in the process of policy formulation, with the state department at the core.

This represents a clear departure from the manner in which former president Trump conducted foreign policy, wherein he announced major decisions through his Twitter handle. Twiplomacy, as the Trumpian practice came to be known, rode roughshod over institutional thinking, revealing grey areas in the process of policy formulation with serious potential ramifications for the United States’ prestige as the sole superpower of the world.

Contrarily, President Biden has put his weight behind his Secretary of State Antony Blinken and stated that the world needs to know that “when you speak, you speak for me.” Telling the audience that he worked with Blinken for 20 years, he promised to extend his support to the diplomatic corps when he said: “I will have your back…With your help, the United States will again lead not just by example of our power but the power of our example.” This is a far cry from when many senior officials of the Trump Administration found themselves tweeted out of office.

Biden’s assertion that “America is back … Diplomacy is back at the center of our foreign policy” could be described as the headline of his speech. This articulation serves as a foil to Trump’s ‘America First’ slogan that resulted in a considerable erosion of the global standing of the US and undermined the country’s global partnerships.

The presidential speech was significant in several respects. The US president not only asserted his country’s global leadership, and vowed to work with allies and partners to tackle global challenges but also made a bid to reclaim moral high ground in addition to putting rivals on notice.

A review of the speech shows that President Biden assigned significant space to Russia by calling the Kremlin out for its alleged interference in the US election, the killing of dissent, jailing of opposition leader Aleksey Navalny, and mass-scale rights abuses and arrests of peaceful protesters. He also ordered the state department to conduct a thorough review of Moscow’s behaviour, to be followed by a collaboration with European allies to chart the way forward.

President Biden was categorical in announcing that his administration would build and strengthen global partnerships and alliances, a theme that has been consistent in his campaign speeches. He asserted: “Alliances are our greatest asset…We will compete from a position of strength by building back better at home, working with our allies and partners, renewing our role in international institutions, and reclaiming our credibility and moral authority.”

The European countries have warmly welcomed the change in tone and the inclusive approach to international relations announced by the Biden Administration. However, there is noticeable fatigue within the EU for a new round of imminent cold war. To top it all, questions are being raised about the precise objectives that the Trans-Atlantic partnership is likely to achieve. French President Emmanuel Macron reflected the prevailing mood when he mooted the idea of “result-oriented multilateralism” during his speech at the Atlantic Council on February 4.

Macron highlighted that indecision and the inability of the Western countries to deliver results, particularly during the pandemic, created space for China to fill in the vacuum. His suggestion of a ‘new consensus’ is aimed at wresting the initiative from China and placing the West at the heart of globalization as its chief defender and promoter.

President Biden described China as the central challenge. However, his China policy is characterized by threats and opportunities, with areas of cooperation and disagreements simultaneously. But, as his speech indicated, the new US administration will not deal with China from the zero-sum mindset.

Ryan Hass, a senior fellow at the Centre for East Asia Policy Studies, says that the Biden Administration’s approach towards China is premised on building leverage “by pursuing domestic renewal, investing in alliances, re-establishing US leadership on the world stage, and restoring American authority in advocating for universal values.”

This broad approach tends to reverse Trump’s weaponized policy towards Beijing in terms of its ideological undertone and seeks to build bridges through cooperation without hesitating to push back when required. This is a significant shift and the broadness of the contours means that it will take some time before the policy can be rendered more clearly into a specific set of actions.

Daniel Magruder, a federal executive fellow in the Centre for Security, Strategy, and Technology, put it succinctly when he said that the “takeaway from this week’s speech was: Cooperate when we can, but compete when we must.”

The Middle East, a region of abiding interest to any US administration, found mention in Biden’s speech in the context of ending American support for the Saudi-led military offensive against Houthi rebels in Yemen, a war that has fast morphed into a humanitarian crisis as per the United Nations. The halting of arms sales and military support to Saudi Arabia and the appointment of a peace envoy are some other measures announced by the US.

Together with America’s possible return to or at least endorsement of the Iran nuclear deal, though not mentioned in Biden’s speech, this policy shift is likely to cause consternation among the ME allies, particularly Israel. Observers of Middle Eastern politics have noted the absence of the mention of Israel, Iran, or even Abraham Accords in the presidential speech. They believe that, no matter what the urgency of domestic and global issues, Biden must have come forward to reassure his ME allies of his support.

President Biden used the language of human solidarity to express his country’s commitment to reintegrating refugees. He has already ordered the reunion of children languishing at the Mexico border with their parents. This policy action has come at a time when refugees carry all manner of negative tags – from being a threat to the American values and culture to being an economic drain.

Of critical significance is the challenge of selling American diplomacy to the American public that has increasingly grown weary of its country’s global footprint reflected in overseas wars and the so-called ‘nation-building’ missions. Trump successfully turned the tide against globalization and presided over the retreat of the US from the international arena into a nationalistic cocoon.

Biden faces the uphill task of explaining to the American people how advocacy of global issues such as human rights, democracy, and press and political freedoms will affect them at home. At no point in history has the connection between domestic issues and the foreign policy of the US been more clearly established than now.

The Biden Administration is confronted with the task of maintaining a delicate balance of domestic considerations and the imperative of reasserting the US’s leadership globally. As the four Trump years proved, an extreme position may appeal to a particular constituency but has major implications for a country that is the only superpower of the world.

As they say, the proof of the pudding lies in the eating. President Biden may have struck the right chord but it has yet to be seen how he backs his words with specific actions. One may be tempted to describe the speech as ‘Biden’s doctrine’ but as political scientists have maintained it is more of a restatement of a traditional US position that seeks to right the wrongs after Trump’s four years.

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