**Welcome back America – Warning, foreign policy challenges ahead!**

[Saad Masood](https://dailytimes.com.pk/writer/saad-masood/)

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A fiercely divided vote, one party not conceding the election to the other, baseless assertion of wide voter fraud, firings of key governmental personnel, military commanders stepping into the fray. The reader would be forgiven to think that is a political set piece from a developing country but it is not. These are the happenings in the United States of America! Come what may, this year has surely dented the international credentials of a country that was once the bastion of the free world! And there are yet more challenges to come! Consider the following five-headed hydra of foreign policy headaches for the incoming Biden administration.

First, the growing trust deficit between US and its allies across the world. Over the last four years, the Trump administration has gradually receded inwards and exited from a string of international accords and treaties. On face value, this is akin to the allies being ‘stabbed in the back’ – gradually and even more painfully! UN, NATO, WHO, Paris Accord – the list goes on. Bridging that trust gap will not be easy – not only internationally but also nationally. Trump’s nationalist and protectionist approach to ‘Make America Great Again’ has now been ingrained in the people and with almost half the popular vote still with Trump, Joe Biden will have a difficult time explaining to the American people the principles of his foreign policy. Why democracy is preferred over dictatorships? Why an international leader is more acceptable than a despot? Why friends are needed in this globalised world? Why American prosperity at home depends on US playing its part abroad? Why common ground and consensus building is important within the comity of nations? This is an uphill task to say the least! Then comes the slow reversal of isolationist tendencies of the last four years. This will include engaging with organisations and countries around the world and making sure that betrayed partners understand that America is here to stay and will have their backs no matter what. Again, a tall order.

Second, what to do about Iran? Since Trump walked away from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) agreed between Iran and a six-nation negotiating group, the region is flailing in the wind. At the time of its pact, the JCPOA was a simple and amenable deal – Iran restricts its nuclear programme in return for removal of relevant sanctions and affordable connection with global markets. A lot of water has flown under that particular bridge since then. Trump’s arm-twisting approach and without a diplomatic exit to boot has sent Iran into the arms of China and Russia. Iran has also reneged on its part of the bargain in a tit for tat response to the Trump White House. So much so that Iran is pointedly out of compliance with the JCPOA and is behaving even more aggressively on all other fronts. In this scenario the most that Biden can do is leverage any remaining goodwill in the region to creep back into the deal, get back some or all of Iranian compliance and correct identified flaws in the pact. The one thing in his favour? The huge stress the Iranian economy is under because of various embargoes and the spread of COVID-19. This will provide Joe Biden with a window of opportunity but that window will close rapidly along with the erosion of any meagre amount of political capital left.

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Third, reversal of Trump’s populist but highly short-sighted policy on China. For Donald Trump, the trade war with China was a zero-sum game. It need not be that! But this stride towards a realistic and effective policy on China has to start with the acceptance that China is a major player in the word now and will vie for influence as much as the US. Constructive mutual existence will need to be Biden’s key US foreign policy towards China and will be underpinned by three strategies. One, rollback of some of the aggressive trade posturing that was the hallmark of the previous White House. Two, work all his diplomatic magic – keeping the aforementioned trust deficit in mind – to form a united front with America’s forlorn allies to manage the ever growing international impact of China. Three, use China as a unifying factor at home in the US to mimic the oft repeated slogan of ‘strong at home to be strong abroad’.

Fourth, walk the tight rope between lending support to Saudi and pushing the envelope on increased human rights in the kingdom. This challenge also extrapolates to the wider Middle East including Israel. While Biden needs to laud the liberalisation efforts by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, he will have to tread carefully around extending further military and diplomatic support, with especially treating the war in Yemen as a litmus test for the region. Further normalisation of relations between Israel and other Middle East countries maybe on the cards albeit difficult but Biden will also have to ensure that the Palestinian concerns are also given credence – which unfortunately had been almost completely ignored by the Trump White House.

Fifth, bring more stability and equality domestically. The last four years have been troublesome at best. It seems that the proclamation in the Declaration of Independence, ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal’, has taken quite a hit! Partisan politics and partisan opinions have been rampant. So much so that the notion of equality – a given in the US – has come into question. Joe Biden will have his work cut out for him to reconcile these extreme positions and become president for all Americans. But he must, if the US wants to regain even an iota of moral authority lost during the last presidential term.

These are difficult times – a time for serious people and Trump’s fifteen minutes seem to be over! Biden will inherit a lot of foreign policy challenges but there is no reason that his years of experience on the US political scene cannot enable him to slowly but surely wade through these troubled waters. He must, or else his lengthy career as a public servant will only become a footnote in history!