

## **Will the US Policy Towards the Middle East Change Under a Biden Presidency?**

The United States is headed towards another presidential election , which many observers and commentators view as potentially destiny -defining. Other countries around the world, including American allies in Europe and in the Middle East, are also anxiously wondering whether and how the US foreign policy might change under a Biden presidency and in what regions changes would be more pronounced?

### **Still Uncertain Outcome of the Elections**

The first point to be stressed at the outset is that it is not certain that Joe Biden , the Democrats nominee for president, would win the elections. Trump still has a chance to win the election.

Clearly, many Americans are frustrated with Donald Trump's handling of the Covid 19 crisis and the high rate of infection and death among Americans. Moreover, Covid 19 pandemic has negatively affected many Americans economically, especially the more vulnerable groups, among whom are the ethnic minorities. Significant numbers of Americans are also concerned about Trump's divisive rhetoric on race, which they see largely responsible for the outbreak of political protest and violence, such as those in Minneapolis, Portland, and in Kenosha , Wisconsin.

Many Americans, especially those leaning towards the left, are also concerned about Trump's abuse of presidential power. They fear that, if continued ,this behavior could undermine American democracy, deepen ethnic, racial and other cleavages and thus undermine the nation's cohesion. These concerns could help some of those, who voted for Trump in 2016, to vote for Biden in the forthcoming elections.

However, there are other factors , which could work in Trump's favor and enable him to win reelection. An important factor could be the issue of law and order. Many Americans worried as they watched peaceful protests turned into violence and looting. They fear that a Biden presidency might not be strong on law and order. Demands by some on the Democratic Party's left wing to defund the police or at least undermine its authority is viewed by great concern by other Americans, including some who dislike Trump.

The economic agenda of the party's left wing is also disturbing to some Americans. The Trump camp has used this concern and has accused Biden of being a rabid socialist. This is not true. But many Americans could buy into such claims. Should this happen, it would work in Trump's favor.

Then there are cultural issues. Many Americans see Democrats , especially those on the left not sufficiently committed to what they see as American history and values. Demands by African-Americans to remove the monuments dedicated to some American political and military figures, because of their approval of slavery, are seen by some as attacks on the entire US history.

These groups also feel that increasingly the entire Western civilization, of which America's is a part, is under attack. In their view, growing multi-culturalism in America and the questioning of Western values has diluted America's foundational values. They see Donald Trump as the sole defender of Western civilization in America.

Then there is the question of immigration. A large number of Americans, especially those of European ancestry, are against unlimited migration. They believe their presence is changing America's social,

ethnic, and cultural landscape beyond recognition. They fear that under a Biden Presidency recent efforts to curb immigration, especially illegal immigration, could be overturned.

In short, in this election, it is not only usual issues of economic welfare and peace and security that are at stake, but also the very question of what kind of country and society America will become in the next fifty years? Considerable numbers of Americans do not agree with the Biden vision.

On foreign policy, a significant number of Americans support a tough line on China and Russia as well as making sure that China does not take unfair advantage of America in trade. They agree with Trump that America's allies should pay more for their own defense.

### **What Will Change in US Foreign Policy If Biden Wins the Presidency?**

But assuming that Joe Biden wins the presidency on November 3 2020 what aspects of US foreign policy would change?

Under a Biden Presidency the tone and style of US foreign policy will become softer and less confrontational, and diplomacy and effort at consensus building with allies will replace unilateral actions, at least at first. Biden will try to mend fences with America's European allies and will refocus the US attention on NATO.

However, on trade issues , it is unlikely that Biden's position would be much softer than that of Trump. The feeling that America has been taken advantage of is quite widespread among the Americans people. There is also a protectionist wing within the Democratic party, which believes that American workers should be protected against unfair competition from countries such China ,but also some European countries.

On China and Russia Biden has taken a hard position. Whether this posture would continue or become softer is hard to predict. Some progress on arms control with Russia is quite possible, but an overall thaw in relations is unlikely to happen immediately in Biden presidency.

### **The Middle East**

The area of foreign policy least likely to change under a Biden Presidency is the Middle East. In a Biden administration , too , US support for Israel will remain strong, and it is unlikely that that a Biden Presidency would pressure Israel on reaching a settlement with the Palestinians, which requires territorial concessions on the part of Israel. Biden is a staunch supporter of Israel and so are his key advisers , notably Tony Blinken; most likely he will be his national security adviser and will exert great influence on his Middle East policy.

Biden administration , too, will encourage the process of normalization of relations between Israel and the Arab states, including those of the Persian Gulf. Meanwhile, it is unlikely that Biden will change US relations with Saudi Arabia substantially. It may not encourage , as Trump has done, the irrational policies of Mohammad Bin Salman, but he would not endanger Saudi-American alliance. The same would apply to other GCC states. The relationship is important for the US strategically and financially.

As regards Iran, it is quite unlikely that the US would agree to a lifting of sanctions in the absence of an agreement, which addresses issues related to Iran's missile program and its so-called destabilizing

activities. The Biden administration, too, would be highly receptive to Israel's and Netanyahu's concerns, much more than was the case with President Obama.

Even if the US rejoins the JCPOA, sanctions or at least most of them, will remain in place. This is what Blinken has clearly stated. However, a Biden presidency would be more willing to talk to Iran and use diplomacy rather than pure pressure in order to resolve outstanding differences between Tehran and Washington. In this regard, a Biden presidency would be more like Bill Clinton's administration.

However, even under Biden, it is unlikely that the US-Iran relations could improve, without some give and take on Iran's missiles and on regional issues. The question is whether a Biden administration would be reasonable in its demands on Iran and will offer Iran some incentives, including sanctions relief, in order to make talks and compromise possible, or it, too, would reduce diplomacy to delivering ultimatums. At any rate, Iran should not expect any miraculous change in US approach under Biden.