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Biden's foreign policy: What is in the box for the world and Pakistan?

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By Moneeb Jaffar Mir

Democratic candidate Joe Biden has won the controversial American presidential election of 2020. The newly elected president is, however, set to face a host of foreign policy challenges. Many of these challenges primarily stem from President Trump's deviation from the traditional American approach to foreign policy. President Trump pursued unilateralist, transactional, and undisciplined foreign policy. Most of his foreign policy decisions were whimsical, unpredictable and based on his personal relationships with foreign leaders. Most notably, his twitter rants also set the foreign policy agenda. In contrast, President-elect Biden brings decades-long experience in foreign affairs. He has previously served as the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and Vice President. It is, therefore, likely that he would pursue a traditional foreign policy approach. He has committed that under his presidency, the US would renew its global leadership by increasing its engagement with the international community. In view of this, Biden would be mainly focused upon repairing American's foreign relations and again putting the US in lead on scores of international challenges.

Some of Biden's foreign policy postulates:

- ***Revival of multilateralism:***

Biden is inclined to revive multilateralism which eroded under President Trump owing to his 'America First' policy. For instance, Donald Trump, disregarded the phenomenon of global warming. He pulled America out of the 2015 Paris Climate agreement, a landmark deal aimed to strengthen global response in the face of imminent threat of climate change. President-elect Biden, however, has a diametrically opposite view to it. In part Paris Climate agreement is a legacy of President Obama. His stance on multilateralism can be gauged from a recent statement in which he said "it (multilateralism) makes us more secure and more successful. We amplify our own strength, extend our presence around the globe, and magnify our impact while sharing global responsibilities with willing partners". Keeping that in the view, he has pledged to prioritize fighting climate change and to rejoin the Paris Climate Agreement on his first day in office. Similarly, he is likely to prioritize multilateral engagement on various other global issues, such as public health, trade, nuclear non-proliferation, human rights and a rules-based international order.

- ***China***

Rising China is not only perceived as a competitor in Washington, but also as a threat. In recent years a bipartisan consensus has emerged on containing China out of the fear that China could overtake the US in coming decades, in turn it would reorder the international system. President Donald Trump pursued a confrontational approach towards China. He engaged in a trade war, as he imposed tariffs on Chinese imports; and perpetually accused China of unfair trade practices and stealing intellectual property. China retaliated by imposing similar counter-tariffs on US exports. Meanwhile, military competition in the South China Sea and Indo-Pacific region also escalated. Here, President Biden is likely to follow a similar policy approach, albeit a nuanced one. Moreover, President Biden will be able to bridge the Trans-Atlantic differences and converge European and American outlook towards China, thereby constricting strategic space for China.

- ***Relations with allies***

The 'America First' slogan pioneered by Trump catalyzed the decline of American influence: With the world losing its confidence in the US leadership; there is a widening trust deficit between the U.S. and its allies. Donald Trump strained relations with several traditional US allies, including Australia, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, and Japan. NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) also incurred wrath of Donald Trump, who criticized the trans-Atlantic alliance's member states for not contributing enough towards their own defense, and instead depending on the US for security. Trump called for burden sharing for the continuity of the alliance. Biden not only aims to restore historic US partnerships with its allies but also plans to "reimagine" them for the future.

- ***Russia:***

Since Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, and subsequently, its alleged interference in 2016 US presidential election, relations between the US and Russia have nosedived to an all-time low in the post-cold war era. Nevertheless, Donald Trump seemed inclined to reset relations with Russia and formed a personal rapport with the Russian president. However, Biden, during his election campaign depicted Russia as an 'opponent' and the 'biggest threat' to the American security. It ostensibly remains self-evident that the US under Biden would be tough on Russia, and along with China, Russia might also prove to be an issue of bipartisan consensus. Given Biden's vow to strengthen NATO, it would not be erroneous to conclude that strengthening of NATO will mainly be aimed at countering resurging Russia.

- **Iran:**

Donald Trump withdrew from JCPOA (Joint Action Plan of Action), also known as Iran nuclear deal in 2018 and imposed new sanctions on Iran. The deal was signed between Iran and the P5+1 (China France, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States) on July 14, 2015. It was a multilateral agreement aimed at lifting of crippling economic sanctions on Iran in return for its commitment to limit its sensitive nuclear activities and to allow international inspectors for intrusive inspections of its nuclear facilities. Joe Biden has indicated preference to rejoin the nuclear agreement with a condition as a two-step approach, saying, "If Iran returns to strict compliance with the nuclear deal, the United States would rejoin the agreement as a starting point for follow-on negotiations."

- **India**

It is another area where there seems to be a convergence between Biden and Trump. Since bipartisan consensus exists on deepening relations with India as an important 'strategic partner'. Under Biden, there would be continuity in the US policy towards India. However, issues will periodically emerge on which there will be divergence between Washington and New Delhi. Trump administration pursued a closer defence and strategic relationship through conclusion of agreements such as Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) for sharing of geospatial intelligence. Meanwhile, during Trump era tensions arose over trade relations between the two countries and professional visas for Indian citizens. During Biden's presidency, India and US will work towards addressing trade and visas issues. It is also expected that Biden administration will raise issues of Hindutva extremism, rising religious intolerance, and Indian human rights violations in Kashmir with the Modi regime. This will lead to push back from New Delhi, which could probably strain bilateral relations.

- **Pakistan:**

Bilateral relations between Pakistan and the US remained tensed in the first two years of Trump's presidency. In 2019 a temporary thaw in the bilateral ties emerged due to increasing alignment of interests on the Afghan peace process. Prime Minister of Pakistan Imran Khan paid a visit to the U.S. in July 2019 and met Donald Trump at the White House. During this meeting, Trump also offered his mediation on the lingering Kashmir dispute. He also showed interest in strengthening trade ties with Pakistan. Despite Pakistan playing a key role in the Afghan Peace process, there was little progress on the trade front. Additionally, neither has US pushed India to resolve the Kashmir issue nor has it helped Pakistan to get out of Financial Action Task Force (FATF) grey list. As far as its foreign policy approach towards Pakistan is concerned, the White House under Biden would need Islamabad to play an important

role in the Afghan peace process. After the successful completion of the Afghan peace process, Afghanistan chapter in Pak-US relations might close after two decades. It is hoped in Islamabad that the US will stop looking at Pakistan through Afghan prism and relations with the US will take a fresh start. However, there are fears of abandonment. It is unclear what would be Islamabad's value for Washington and what would keep it interested in Islamabad in post Afghan peace process scenario? What further heightens these fears is American bonhomie with India, where the US sees India as a counterbalance to rising China. However, Pakistan-China continue to deepen their strategic relations. In spite of having difficult relations with China, Washington will most likely not ask Pakistan to choose between China and the US because it would ultimately push Pakistan more towards China. Owing to the fact that Pakistan is close to China, the nature of US relations with China in the future could affect Pakistan-US relations.

Conclusion:

It can be argued that Biden would take a traditional foreign policy route to reframe US foreign policy on various fronts. Contrary to Donald Trump's 'America First' policy, Biden appears to be unwaveringly determined to revive multilateralism that he believes would help the US to reassert itself at the world stage. He also seems to be committed to reset relations with American allies that were sidelined during Trump's era. China and India remain two areas of convergence, where Biden's policy doesn't appear to be changing much to that of Trump's. As along with the strategic partnership with India, various other multilateral platforms would be utilized to contain rising China. Russian resurgence would be given a stronger opposition, and Iranian nuclear deal would be rejoined under the new administration. Ongoing US engagement with Pakistan would remain intact until the completion of the Afghan Peace Process. However, in the aftermath of Afghan Peace Process, the nature of relations between the two countries remains unclear. Policymakers in Islamabad will have to display skillfulness to choose a suitable way to approach the new US-administration. The policymakers need to ensure that US-Pakistan relationship that has long remained dominated by strategic concerns needs to be more dynamic, where more attention is given to strengthening the economic ties.

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