What Biden Will Mean for the Rest of the World

Abstract The decisions facing President Biden will be complex and multifaceted, but if he acts shrewdly, the US-China relationship can still lead to a more stable global environment. How can the world navigate the US-China relationship, and what should Biden learn from the rest of the world?

Project Syndicate You've warned that "the international order has lagged dangerously behind shifting global power dynamics." Will US President-elect Joe Biden's administration improve prospects of reform?

Kishore Mahbubani Sadly, the answer is no. The combination of intellectual laziness and political inertia has fueled the belief in Washington, DC, that weaker multilateral institutions are better for America's national interests. But, while that logic may have had some merit in a unipolar world, it does not suit the multipolar world in which we live. As Bill Clinton put it in 2003, the United States should be trying to create the kind of world in which it would like to live when it is "no longer the military, political, and economic superpower."

America's proclivity for constraining multilateral institutions goes back decades, perhaps as far as Ronald Reagan's presidency. For example, the US has long fought to reduce its contributions to the United Nations, and has even withheld payments, even though the money saved is a drop in the bucket of the US budget.

If the Biden administration is truly committed to multilateralism—and, more fundamentally, to being a good global citizen—it should immediately pay all US arrears. This would send a powerful message, opening the way for a broader rethink of the twentieth-century multilateral order and make it fit for purpose in the (Asia-led) twenty-first century.

PS In January 2019, you noted that President Donald Trump was trusted by much of the bottom 50% of earners. Trump's opponents thus faced a choice: "feel good by condemning Trump" or "do good by attacking the elite interests that contributed to his election." Biden stuck to the first path. But by running largely on the platform that he wasn't Trump, he will enter the White House with the US as politically polarized

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as ever. Are there lessons in building trust and broadly credible institutions that the Biden administration should take from East Asia?

KM The first lesson that the Biden administration should take from East Asia begins with a look at the relative distribution of income. The latest data for Japan (2012) show that 12.3% of the country's total income goes to the top 1% of earners, while 19.6% of the total goes to the bottom 50%. In South Korea, the latest comparable figures (2015) are 14 and 19.3%.

In the US, the figures are reversed, with the top 1% claiming 18.7% of total income, and the bottom 50% getting just 13.5% (as of 2019). The simple explanation for this imbalance is that the US has become a plutocracy, in which the super-wealthy have hijacked the political system to advance their own interests. As the political scientists Martin Gilens and Benjamin Page wrote in 2014, "Economic elites and organized groups representing business interests have substantial independent impacts on US government policy, while average citizens and mass-based interest groups have little or no independent influence."

This has contributed significantly to the despair and frustration that have enveloped the white working class, fueling support for the supposedly "anti-establishment" Trump. But, far from breaking economic elites' hold over government, Trump's actions—from hiring industry insiders to lead regulatory agencies to cutting taxes for the wealthiest Americans—reinforce plutocracy.

If Biden wants to build the kind of public trust and credible institutions seen in East Asia, he will need to reject plutocracy unequivocally. This means, first and foremost, introducing tough new regulations on money in politics. Here, Australia also provides a model worth emulating.

PS Perhaps the only matter on which US Democrats and Republicans agree is that China's rise represents a threat to US interests—a simplistic and dangerous view that you condemned in 2018. While Biden will presumably act less crudely and impetuously than Trump, do you think this will actually leave China better off? Or do you envision Biden taking a more methodical approach—possibly with the support of once-alienated allies—to "containing" China?

KM On China, Biden's hands are tied. Given the overwhelming bipartisan consensus, appearing weak on China would be political suicide. Biden is well aware of this: he called Chinese President Xi Jinping a "thug" during the election campaign, precisely to dispel any doubts about his willingness to take a tough line.

Yet, as former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger once pointed out to me, the US lacks any real strategy for dealing with China. If Biden is truly shrewd, he will devise one that advances core American interests (such as protecting US businesses in China) and permits cooperation on shared challenges, like the Covid-19 crisis. If Winston Churchill could cooperate with Josef Stalin to fight Adolf Hitler, the US can certainly manage to work with China to end a pandemic.

At the same time, Biden should recognize that China still represents massive economic opportunities for the US. American farmers have been badly hit by Trump's reckless trade wars. They would be far better off if Biden gradually reduced the trade

sanctions on China and improved US farmers' access to Chinese markets. Beyond the economic benefits, this would help to erode Trump's base, improving Democrats' electoral prospects in the coming years.

PS On the Chinese side, to what extent have policymakers grasped the intensity of the shift in US public and elite opinion, and reconsidered their "calm and rational policies toward the US"? How might their calculations change under the Biden administration, and how should they change?

KM China has one big strategic advantage: it always plays the long game. As Kissinger notes in his 2011 book *On China*, the Chinese play Wei Qi, not chess. And, as he puts it, "Wei Qi is about the protracted campaign." So, while the US lurches from one administration to another, China has been quietly executing its long-planned maneuvers, gradually and consistently strengthening its position.

Deepening international ties—including with faraway countries—is central to China's strategy. Consider Brazil. In 2000, it took six months for the country to trade \$1 billion worth of goods with China; today, it takes 72 h. Moreover, a Brazilian is at the helm of the New Development Bank, established by the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa). Such ties have bolstered the bilateral relationship, even as Brazil's right-wing populist president, Jair Bolsonaro, has emulated the China-bashing Trump in other ways.

But China has also made serious strategic mistakes. A tsunami of anti-China sentiment engulfed India after last June's clashes on the Himalayan border, which left 20 Indian soldiers dead. And some ASEAN countries remain troubled by China's territorial claims in the South China Sea.

China's leaders are astute enough to recognize that if Biden does restore America's reputation as a reliable ally, a formidable group of countries might join the US in confronting China. Given this, China's leaders should work hard to establish constructive, mutually beneficial relations with the Biden administration, remaining all the while "calm and rational."

PS In your recent book, *Has China Won? The Chinese Challenge to American Primacy*, you note that when you served in the Singapore Foreign Service, you learned a "big lesson" from Singapore's three exceptional geopolitical masters (Lee Kuan Yew, Goh Keng Swee, and S. Rajaratnam): The first step to formulate any long-term strategy is to frame the right questions. As US strategists attempt to develop "new analytical frameworks to capture the essence of the competition with China," what questions must they answer first?

KM In *Has China Won?*, I spell out ten major questions, all of which the Biden administration should consider. Here is another big one: What happens if China's economy surpasses America's in the next decade or two?

For many in Washington, DC, this scenario is unthinkable. But the truth is that it's entirely possible. It's also possible that the US can remain the world's most influential country, even if it becomes the number two economic power. George Kennan, the master strategist who shaped US policy toward the Soviet Union during the Cold War,

explained how in 1947: the US creates “among the peoples of the world generally” the impression that it is successful domestically and enjoys a “spiritual vitality.”

If he were alive today, Kennan would heartily disapprove of US strategists’ belief that the country’s global primacy is more important than the interests of its people. He would also strongly oppose the relentless growth of defense spending. After all, Kennan would surely recognize, the outcome of the US-China geopolitical contest will be determined not by bullets and bombs, but by the two countries’ relative “spiritual vitality.” That is why the Biden administration should shift America’s focus from maintaining global primacy to improving human well-being.

PS In May, you said that Hong Kong had become a “pawn” in the geopolitical chess match between the US and China. Have China’s decisive moves to assert the mainland’s control there given it an advantage in the game? Where does that leave the people of Hong Kong?

KM All “great powers” put their national interests ahead of those of smaller autonomous territories. US Republicans block Puerto Rico from becoming a state because they worry that the extra votes would go largely to Democrats. Similarly, China’s central government will not allow instability in Hong Kong to destabilize China and undermine its strategic position vis-à-vis the US. That is why the National Security Law was passed.

The conventional wisdom is that Hong Kong will suffer mightily as a result of increased central government control. But it is just as likely that the increased stability will leave Hong Kong’s people better off, especially if the city government can finally overcome vested interests and expand its public housing program significantly. This would go a long way toward addressing a major source of popular anger in Hong Kong.

PS What advice do you have for the leaders of other territories and countries that are likely to get caught in the crossfire of the Sino-American rivalry?

KM Don’t make the same mistake as Australia. In Asian cultures, including China’s, saving face is important. When Australia publicly called for an international inquiry into China’s handling of the Covid-19 crisis, it put China on the spot. With so many eyes on the standoff, China cannot blink—or it will risk more confrontations with more countries. So, all Australia will get from its initiative is a slow, painful war of economic attrition.

Fortunately, most countries have made clear that they don’t want to take sides in the US-China rivalry. Neither the US nor China should try to force them to.

PS You note in *Has China Won?* your diverse array of cultural connections that extend across Asia. But your description of those linkages reveals an active interest in searching for them, such as through your name’s Arabic-Persian roots. How, if at all, did this inclination influence your decade of service as an ambassador to the UN, and what does it tell us about the conceptual limits of the nation-state?

KM The personal cultural connectedness I have felt across a wide range of countries, from Morocco to South Korea, has been a huge advantage in my career as a diplomat and writer. In Morocco, I heard my favorite singer, Mohammad Rafi, perform in a remote village. In Korea, I encountered the story of the Indian princess who landed on the peninsula in the first century AD.

This cultural connectedness makes me a keen optimist. I believe that, over time, we will look at shared challenges like global warming and the Covid-19 pandemic, and recognize that we belong to common humanity. Nation states have become like small cabins on a larger global boat. Having the most luxurious cabin means nothing if the boat sinks.

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