

THE SOCIAL SCIENCE PERSPECTIVE
Volume 1, Issue 3, 2021

THE WORLD VIEW

The Biden Administration: What Kind of Multilateralism is in Store?

The assumption of power by the Biden Presidency has opened out many possibilities for the future of multilateralism. His return to multilateral diplomacy, trade and politics seems to be quite promising. The Trump administration ripped apart all that was carefully nurtured over the years. In his first few days in office Trump withdrew from the Paris climate change agreement, the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP), the Iran Nuclear Deal, and delegitimized the very idea of multilateralism itself. Well known foreign policy expert Richard Haas termed it the “withdrawal doctrine”. In the whole process much damage was inflicted to the credibility to the US leadership.

The debate between multilateralism and isolationism has been an ongoing one especially during the Presidency of Trump. Biden will be hard pressed to restore America’s role in the comity of nations. This includes restoring Washington’s democratic credentials, its moral standing as well as reopening the American economy. This is because the Trump Presidency seems to have left behind a fractured and unstable world order. Many of the global challenges Biden believes needs to be faced together.

However there will be a variety of contestations en route. Hence he cannot take the Europeans for granted. The European Union may have some reservations in challenging Beijing. The EU has negotiated the Comprehensive Investment Act with China. Perhaps it is one of the most ambitious agreements that China has negotiated with a third country. Some would argue that it is a win for a China and a blow for transatlantic relations.

However the overall sense is that the European leaders are keen to engage the United States, after the Trump tsunami. Trump had also withdrawn from the UN Human Rights Council, alleging that the Council was anti-Jewish in its outlook. The Trump administration also argued that the Council consisted of Human rights abusers like China and Venezuela. Biden is likely to rejoin the Human Rights Council. As Biden often says the most effective way of promoting human rights is to reengage with the Council, though in need of reforms. Issues like elections by secret ballot and Israeli bashing have often been controversial. Hence engagement by Biden has been linked to reforms of the Human Rights Council too.

Trump undid many hard years of bargaining and negotiations in the WTO and virtually strangulated it. He also introduced a phase of trade wars. His underlying argument was that the WTO did not serve US interests. Biden has been known to be a critic of Trump’s decision to undermine the Dispute Resolution Panel of the WTO. Trump even refused to appoint judges to the Appellate Body. For almost two year he blocked the appointment of new judges due to complaints over judicial activism at the WTO. Deep down it had to do with issues over the sovereignty of the US. By December 2019 Appellate Body was reduced to just one judge that made it virtually dysfunctional. No trade regime can survive without adjudicating

disputes. He even blocked the appointment of a consensus candidate for the WTO's post of Secretary General. But for Trump Ms. Okonjo-Iweala would have made it to the post. As Nigeria's former Finance Minister, she had vast experience in the World Bank. The US was totally isolated on this issue. It seems possible that Biden will reset and reverse course. The ability of the WTO to negotiate rules and to adjudicate trade disputes is critical to global trade. Though the WTO has its share of problems, yet a world order devoid of rules can be quite chaotic.

Biden has repeatedly emphasized the importance of the TPP in taking on the Chinese. He has already rejoined some of the multilateral treaties and agreements that Trump decided to quit. Biden would have to go through a process of hard diplomatic bargaining to re-enter the TPP, as it carries domestic political risks too. The TPP was the center of an arrangement that was the culmination of a series of efforts. China is waiting on the sidelines to see whether the US will miss the bus, as Beijing would perhaps welcome any form of US isolationism. TPP will reduce tariff and non-tariff barriers among its signatories. When former President Obama had signed the instrument in February 2016, it had incorporated investor state dispute settlement procedures, as a safeguard to take on the Republicans in the US Congress. The challenge Biden faces is the overall skepticism towards multilateral trade deals in the US and has promised to "build it back better". Let us not forget that China celebrated when Washington decided to walk out of the TPP. Biden realizes that any trade deal involves hard bargaining.

In the case of the Paris Climate change agreement all that is required is a month's notice and the US could be back on board by March 2021. Biden decided to rejoin the World Health Organization on the very first day of assuming office. He has also promised to rejoin the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPA) i.e., the Iran Nuclear Agreement. Of course this is also contingent on the compliance of Iran. Needless to say, Biden is also keen to negotiate a successor agreement that will, focus on Iran's missile program.

Trump also withdrew from the Treaty on Open skies, though countries like Britain, France and Germany stayed on. The technical hitch for Biden would be resubmitting these treaties to the Senate in case he decides to re-enter them. Though Biden will reemphasize the importance of multilateralism, yet he will be walking a tight rope in having to simultaneously prioritize US jobs, industries and the search for markets. He may have to draw an eclectic balance between multilateralism and unilateralism. Though the Biden presidency has promised a return to multilateralism, it is bound to be a hard road ahead, but worth the effort. One would need to wait-and-watch on what terms and conditions Biden will return to multilateralism.



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