ASIA RELATIONS

A RETURN TO TRADITIONAL U.S. POLICY?

After a few years of volatility, some predictability is what this region requires



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JOE Biden will soon become the 46th president of the United States with an overwhelming majority. Most of the commentary has been positive.

They suggest that his contrasting personality with the incumbent is what is needed now to narrow the divide that has become increasingly polarised. However, what will a Biden presidency mean to this part of the world?

Leading up to the election, there were speculation on what Biden's foreign policy would look like. Pick up any magazine (*Foreign Affairs* or *The Economist*) or newspaper (the *Wall Street Journal* or *New York Times*) and there were editorials aplenty on the possible foreign policy directions that the new president might pursue.

According to these writers, a Biden presidency would see a return to a more traditional US foreign policy, built on its post-World War 2 alliances. It would be a shift from the current administration's more disruptive and transactional approach that has, according to some observers, irreversibly damaged US' standing in the world.

Still, in reality, will there be much of a change? In a *Foreign Affairs* article earlier this year, Biden presented some indication of the foreign policy direction that he might take.

Biden wrote about the need to renew democracy at home so that it could again be considered a legitimate leader of the free world He wrote: "As a nation, we have to prove to the world that the US is prepared to lead again — not just with the example of our power but also with the power of our example").

He talked about the need for the US to continue "defending against authoritarianism, and advancing human rights".

Biden also wrote of the need to strengthen the US economy, in order to compete with China for the future. This would be achieved, he said, by investments in infrastructure, in research and development, job creation, and strengthening global rules on trade.

This, however, may not necessarily mean the return of the US to the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). Biden writes: "As president, I will not enter into any new trade agreements until we have invested in Americans and equipped them to succeed in the global economy."

In the article, Biden called for the strengthening of North Atlantic Treaty Organisation and cooperation with countries that share US' values and goals. However, he also said this must be achieved by "sharing global responsibilities" and "fortifying our collective capabilities", which to me reads "show me the money".

In relation to China, where Biden's critics have consistently accused him of potentially being soft on, the rhetoric at least appears to suggest otherwise. Biden sees China as the US' major competitor and a challenge to the liberal values and principles it champions, though wisely keeping the door open for dialogue, saying:

"The most effective way to meet that challenge is to build a united front of US allies and partners to confront China's abusive behaviours and human rights violations, even as we seek to cooperate with Beijing on issues where our interests converge, such as climate change, non-proliferation, and global health security."

In short, there does not seem to be any indication that US foreign policy will shift significantly away from the current one that is in place. In part, this reflects the systemic nature of the problem. We are, after all, witnessing a transition from the old order into a new one; and with it the conflict that arises as a new great power takes its place beside the existing one, perhaps with the ultimate goal of eventually replacing it.

Where it may differ, I expect, will be in the style and approach this new foreign policy will be effected. This is important especially if it avoids further alienating its alliance partners in Asia. There is a sense that a change may be good.

They say that consistency is a defining feature of a stable and confident nation's foreign policy. After a few years of volatility, some predictability is probably what this region requires at the moment.

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