

# Biden's Dilemma

by George Friedman - November 10, 2020

The election is over, and barring major fraud or error, Joe Biden will be the next president of the United States. He begins as a weak candidate. The country is divided virtually down the middle; almost half of the country voted against him. Animosity toward him will be similar to that faced by Donald Trump for the past four years.

Congress is deeply divided. The Senate may come in at a tie, with Vice President-elect Kamala Harris holding the deciding vote. In the House of Representatives, the Democrats' majority shrunk to just 14 seats. During the Trump administration, they tended to vote with near unanimity. With a smaller majority they may not, given the emergence of a progressive wing of the party. With Trump gone, unanimity may be gone too. Once the euphoria of victory passes, Biden will have little room for maneuver.

Biden must create a strong foundation for his presidency quickly. When Barack Obama came to office, the dominant issue was the Iraq war. He immediately reached out to the Islamic world to redesign perceptions there, and though it had only limited effect in the Islamic world, it had substantial influence in the United States, which was weary after a decade of war in the region. It represented something new at a time when the old was seen by many as dysfunctional.

For Biden, **there is no towering foreign policy issue**. There are, of course, two towering domestic issues: the COVID-19 crisis and the economy. To some extent there is a tradeoff here, absent a viable vaccine. The more aggressive measures are used to fight the virus, the greater the stress on the economy. The more sensitive one is to the economy, the less obsessed one is with the disease. This is an imperfect view of the situation, but far from preposterous.

Trump regarded the virus as secondary to the economy. The reasonable approach is to take both equally seriously and find solutions for both – reasonable but difficult, when solutions for one impose costs on the other side. (Obviously, each president is expected to invent the impossible, and each president promises to do so.) A “blood, sweat, toil and tears” speech that galvanizes the country to sacrifice on both fronts won't work. In fighting the virus, you are not asking the nation to do something extraordinarily difficult; you are asking it to not do ordinary things. In any case, Biden may have many virtues, but being Churchillian doesn't seem to be one of them.

Biden's promise to unite the country is unlikely enough, for he is trapped in his predecessor's dilemma. Under present circumstances, Biden has limited economic options. And he is dealing with a disease about which he has no real expertise but for which he is expected to implement solutions. Some solutions will come from doctors who are insensitive to the economic consequences of their decisions. Others will come from the Fed and business, who expect the medical system to solve a problem that baffles it. Like Trump, he will have a menu of imperfect choices. Like Trump, he will pay the political price for whatever he chooses. Trump chose what he thought was politically expedient. He was wrong. But if he had chosen differently that would also have been wrong.

I have written about how **the foreign policy of an era tends to follow from one president to another president**. Obama's presidency coincided with the winding down of the jihadist wars. For Obama there were three principles: withdrawing maximum forces from the Middle East, restructuring the U.S.-Chinese relationship, and preventing Russia from dominating Ukraine and other countries. Trump's foreign policy was to continue to reduce the presence of U.S. forces in the Middle East while overseeing a new geopolitical system that binds Israel to the Arab world, heavily increasing pressure on China to change its economic policies, and modestly increasing U.S. presence in Poland and Romania to block Russia.

Biden will open with some easy moves such as rejoining the Paris Agreement. This requires that a country create plans for meeting the treaty's goals, create plans for implementation, and implement them. For Biden, creating a plan he can get through Congress is tough; implementing it is tougher still. Many nations that signed the agreement have not implemented plans keeping with its obligations. But joining is easy and will look good to Biden's fractious party.

He will also revive Atlantic relations by sounding reasonable at the endless meetings that achieve nothing. Aside from Poland and Romania – themselves an extension of the Russia issue – and the perennial issue of defense spending, Washington has few real issues with Europe.

What will matter to Biden will be what mattered to Obama and Trump: China and its economic relationship with the United States, along with protecting the Western Pacific from an unlikely Chinese foray; the continued withdrawal of troops from the Middle East and supporting the Israeli-Arab entente; and the continued attempts to limit Russian efforts at expansion through troop deployment and sanctions.

These are issues that represent continuity and importantly will not detract from the core domestic challenges Biden will grapple with. There are other issues, but shifting them requires dealing with

allies who are deeply invested in them. For example, shifting policy on Iran is possible, but it would create huge tensions with Israel and the Sunni Arab world. Similarly, a shift in Korea policy would create problems with Japan and South Korea.

So the goal of the incoming Biden administration will be to focus on the issue that destroyed Trump: COVID-19 and the economy. To do that, it is necessary to limit or avoid foreign policy initiatives that might weaken Biden's position in Congress and the country. This does not mean that U.S. diplomacy will not change. The myriad meetings will be attended, and a new tone, **same as the old tone**, will be struck.

This model, of course, depends on the actions of others. Jimmy Carter did not expect an uprising in Iran, and George H.W. Bush was not clear on the fall of the Soviet Union. His son did not expect his administration to be all about al-Qaida. The rest of the world can redefine what is important and what is not. Given the U.S. focus on domestic policy, the opportunity for other countries to take advantage of this preoccupation is potentially significant. So the reality is that for the moment, the initiative shifts out of the United States.

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