

Policy Briefs

Challenges of the Biden presidency: mending domestic and foreign rifts

**Al Jazeera Centre for Studies*

November 11 2020





For those who saw the Trump presidency as a dark period in US and world history, Biden's victory is an important positive development. [AFP]

By 7 November 2020, major media had called the US presidential race for the Democratic candidate, Joe Biden. Despite what many called a lacklustre campaign and uninspiring platform, Biden won the most votes ever in a national election. His victory is attributable to several factors: popular revulsion at President Donald Trump's personal and political corruption and mishandling of the coronavirus pandemic, and strong support from key constituencies, including racial and religious minorities, suburban women, and young, left-leaning voters.

But Biden's victory was not the unequivocal repudiation of Trump some had hoped for. Indeed, Trump expanded his base of support, receiving more votes than even Hillary Clinton did in 2016. In other words, Biden's victory did not end Trumpism or unify American society. In light of this, what domestic and foreign policies might we expect from the Biden administration and what challenges will he face in achieving his goals?

Biden's domestic priorities are clear. He must deal immediately with the Covid-19 pandemic and address the economic fallout on working and middle-class families. He must also preserve the unity of the Democratic Party by recognising the crucial role its left wing and activists played in his victory. This requires giving the left greater input in health, labour and education policies and ending the climate of racial discrimination and the targeting of African-Americans, Muslims and Latinos.

In working to accomplish these goals, his biggest challenge will be the stark polarisation of American society. Rapid economic change over the last two decades has given rise to a large swathe of disaffected Americans, left behind by the new economy and convinced that political elites do not care about their interests. Trump spoke to this population with a racist, nationalist, isolationist discourse that promised to restore their lost status and prosperity and blamed their problems on political elites, immigrants and minorities as well as hostile foreign powers like China. The success of these appeals enabled him to tighten his grip over the Republican Party, stoked cultural conflict, and deepened existing rifts in US society. His refusal to concede the election is further cementing this polarisation, perhaps for the foreseeable future. It is not yet clear how Biden can reach these tens of millions of Americans, or if that is even possible. It is clear, however, that Trump will continue to cast a heavy shadow over much of Biden's tenure.

The uncertainty extends to Biden's foreign policy as well, especially vis-à-vis the Middle East, Russia and China. Candidate Biden spoke in general terms about restoring US stature in the world and reviving international cooperation. The way these vague outlines are translated into concrete policy will depend largely on the people he chooses to staff the national security and diplomatic establishment.

It will not be difficult to mend bridges with European allies. Having opposed Brexit, Biden will likely take a tougher stance with the Johnson government in the UK; the same is true with Russian expansionism in Europe and the Middle East, but dealing with Russia will be more fraught and complex. Regarding China, it remains unclear how the Biden administration will approach trade relations or growing maritime rights' disputes.

In the Middle East, the question is whether Biden, coming as he does from a Washington establishment that has long supported unlawful, imperialistic policies like the war on Iraq, is prepared to pursue just, fair policies that promote stability. Certainly, the Biden administration will not abandon Israel in any way, but it will work to keep the Palestinian Authority alive and will likely be guided by conventional US stances on annexation, Israeli settlements and negotiations.

The Biden administration may be less inclined to ignore the tragedy in Yemen and will likely be less accommodating of Arab dictators than President Trump and perhaps firmer on rights

abuses in Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. But any expectation that Biden will work actively against these regimes is surely unwarranted. There is little sign that he will fundamentally shift US policy on Syria, unilaterally lift sanctions on Iran or unconditionally reinstate the nuclear agreement.

The biggest question mark is about Biden's position on Turkey. In the past, he has publicly attacked President Erdogan and is sympathetic to the Kurdish cause and federalism as a solution for ethnic and national conflicts in the Middle East. But Turkey is a key player in the US-Russia balance of power in the Middle East, and President Biden's actions may not correspond to Senator Biden's words.

Overall, despite questions and reservations about Biden's domestic and foreign policies, for those who saw the Trump presidency as a dark period in US and world history, his victory is an important positive development.

**This is a summary of a policy brief originally written in Arabic, available here:*

<https://studies.aljazeera.net/ar/article/4839>