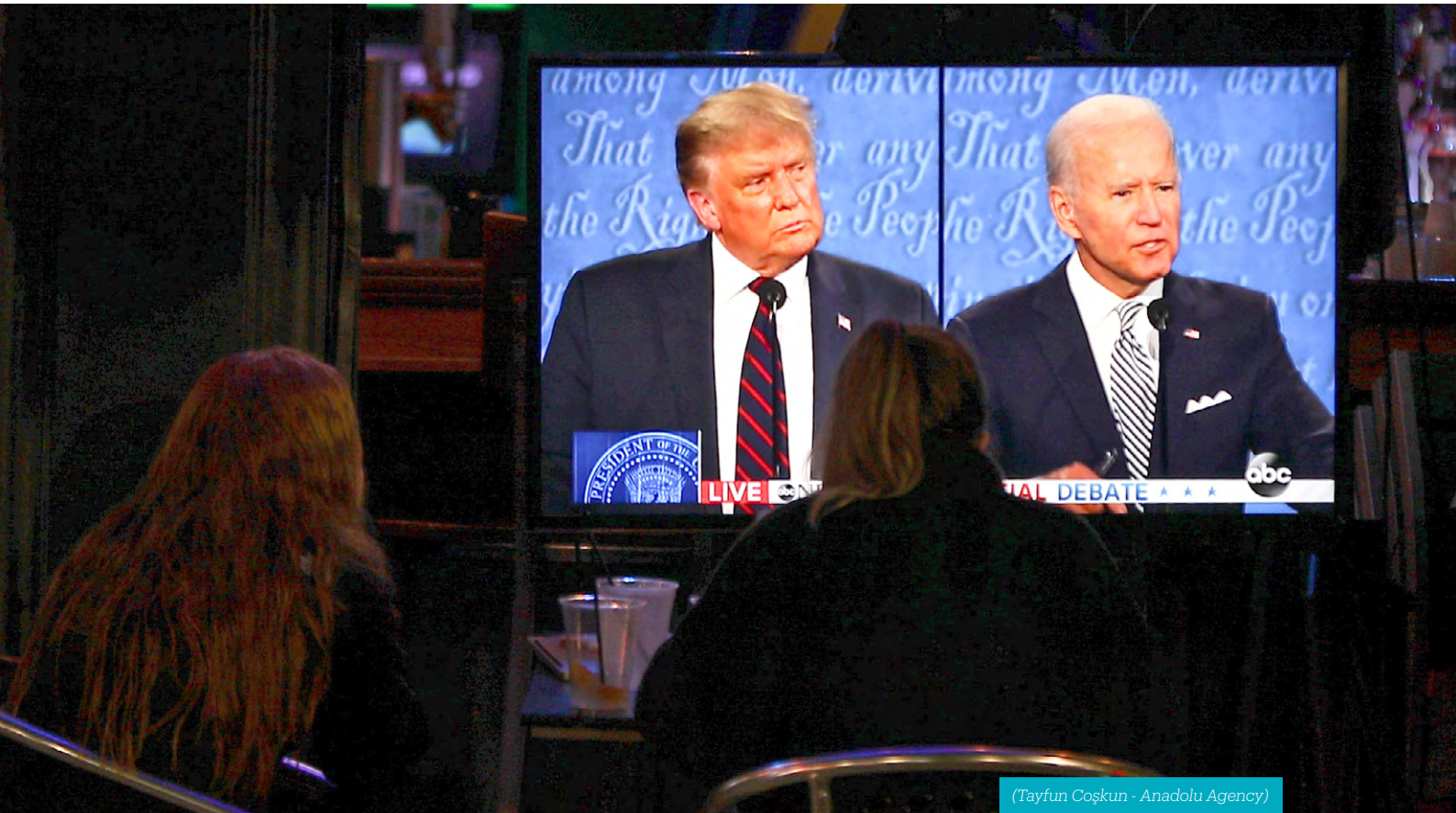


The 2020 American Election:

Foreign Policy Between Joe Biden and Donald Trump

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(Tayfun Coşkun - Anadolu Agency)

While foreign policy may not be a primary concern for US voters, it is a realm over which the US President is granted near-exclusive authority. Joe Biden and Donald Trump offer American voters highly-divergent world views, but can rhetoric overcome deep-rooted issues and would Biden be fundamentally different than Trump on the foreign policy front? Moreover, while relative US power is arguably not what it has been in decades past, it remains the case that foreign policy decisions taken in Washington often have tremendous consequences for the rest of the world. For better or worse, most countries do not have the luxury of ignoring US foreign policy.



Introduction

As far as US election outcomes go, foreign policy is considered to be a [relatively unimportant](#) affair¹, superseded as it is by a range of domestic concerns. This may be the case more so than ever as the US continues to deal with an out of control Covid-19 situation as well as increasingly [worsening civil unrest](#), among a host of other issues. At the same time, given the seemingly diametrically opposed visions being presented by the Trump and Biden campaigns, including their respective visions of America's place in the world, [foreign policy-related](#) issues have ended up playing a significant role in, at the very least, the framing of the respective campaigns. Moreover, for many governments around the world paying close attention to the US election is a necessity, with foreign policy occupying a significant portion of their attention. The forthcoming elections are arguably among the most crucial in US history, both for the future of the US itself and potentially for stability and prosperity in the international arena. Internationally, governments, international institutions, corporations and private citizens alike continue to closely follow foreign policy-related developments in the lead up to the US election as they seek to plan for a variety of contingencies depending on the eventual winner.

With just days to go until the election, the positions of the campaigns have stabilised. While they may differ drastically on certain key issues, there are strategic interests in areas of concern for the United States that neither candidate can fully sidestep. Hence, beyond the political rhetoric, there is a degree of overlap between the two camps. In other words, while most informed observers understand that a Biden presidency would entail a return to a more traditional American approach to foreign policy and international affairs, it remains an open question as to the degree to which Biden would simply represent a [return](#) to Obama-era policies. This Policy Outlook addresses a selective range of foreign policy issues of interest to both US and international stakeholders and seeks to contextualise them in relation to America's strategic outlook and what they might mean to those on their receiving end.

The Future of US Diplomacy

It has become fashionable in recent years to discuss the alleged decline of US power in the world. While it is clear enough that the reach of US influence may not be what it was in previous decades, there is a distinct possibility that this reflects nothing more than a relative decline in the face of a rising China, a resurgent Russia and a host of emerging powers. This is particularly the case in the Middle East where the new conventional wisdom has it that the US is in a slow retreat from the region. Despite this, what is irrefutable is that the US remains a key, if not the key, global power that will shape the dynamics of the international system for years to come. Thus, to frame America's foreign engagement as being characterised by 'decline' arguably represents a misreading of the chessboard of international politics.

What is clear enough, however, is that, particularly under the Trump administration, US diplomatic outreach and engagement with multilateral institutions have suffered. While this may not be a unique development in [US political history](#), the extent to which Donald Trump and those closest to him on the foreign policy front have questioned in principle the usefulness of multilateralism, may, in fact, mark a new chapter in America's engagement with the world.

International relations and foreign policy orthodoxy would have it that another Trump victory means another four years of discontinuity with traditional modes and objectives associated with US foreign policy. Ranging from [trade wars](#) with allies and foes alike under the "America First" mantra and the side-lining of multilateral diplomacy in favour of unilateral coercive measures including financial sanctions, US foreign policy in the era of Donald Trump has been anything but predictable.

At the same time, after four years of adjusting to Trump's transactional approach to international relations with varying degrees of success, and developing close working and personal relations with the President, not all US allies around the world are necessarily in favour of what would likely prove to be a drastic shift in style in the event of what appears to be an increasingly likely Biden victory on November 3rd.

For his part, Joe Biden is viewed as more of a known quantity, representing what many see as a measure of continuity with the past, particularly with the Obama administration in which he served as Vice President, and the [traditional US approach](#) to the rest of the world more generally. However, critics argue that a Biden presidency, rather than im-

¹ According to a Pew Research survey conducted between July 27 and August 2, 2020, foreign policy ranks sixth in issues of concern for voters, with 59 per cent of respondents saying that it is 'very important' in determining whom they vote for.

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proving the US standing in the world, would simply return foreign policy to what Emma Ashford of the Cato Institute [says](#) is a “narrow Washington Consensus that has failed our country and the world.”

Despite [questions](#) surrounding whether or not a Biden presidency would actually return to the approach of the Obama era, US foreign policy under Biden, although it will remain confrontational in certain arenas and thereby maintain a degree of continuity with the last four years of Trump, will in all likelihood seek to rebuild traditional US alliances, restate, at least rhetorically, key US foreign policy commitments and work through multilateral institutions without ceding the US tendency to resort to unilateralism when it suits them best. This is a view echoed by [Paul Musgrave](#), an expert in US foreign policy, who said that “his [Biden] positions are so familiar as to seem more like a retelling of the conventional wisdom than a foreign policy platform.”

One only needs to look at those whom the Biden campaign has employed on the foreign policy front to get a better picture of what a potential Biden administration foreign policy would look like. These include Daniel Benaim, a fellow at the Center for American Progress and a former advisor to Biden when he was VP; Daphna Rand, a former Obama administration official who served as National Security Aide to Obama and held senior posts in the State Department; Mara Rodman, currently an executive VP at the Center for American Progress and former assistant to the Vice President for National Security in both the Clinton and Obama administrations; Susan Rice, National Security Advisor to Obama and former US Permanent Representative to the United Nations; Anthony Blinken, senior foreign policy advisor to the Biden campaign and former senior foreign policy official in the Clinton and Obama administrations; and Jack Sullivan, also a foreign policy advisor the Biden campaign and former Obama-era official who oversaw the negotiations that eventually led to the 2015 Iran nuclear deal. For [Emma Ashford](#), “if personnel is policy, so far it looks like we’ll be getting little more than a rebirth of the Beltway consensus.”

Perhaps more importantly, for the international community the foreign policymaking process under a Biden administration would likely return to something more predictable, which would come as a relief to some governments around the world, particular traditional US strategic allies, who have had to learn to cope with the Trump administration’s confrontational and unpredictable approach to international relations. On the other hand, as mentioned, certain states in strategic regions, most notably the [Gulf](#), have spent a tremendous amount of energy building relationships with the Trump administration and adjusting to his transactionalism and may not be as pleased with a Biden victory as many pundits may believe. In Turkey, for example, a traditional US ally, Biden’s [statement](#) that he would like the US to work with the opposition in Turkey to unseat Turkish President Erdogan raised eyebrows and is unlikely to endear the former Vice President to a country already skeptical of US intentions. This statement was slammed by Turkish officials as “interventionist” and such designs of a bygone era are likely raising eyebrows among other US allies. As Emma Ashford has [argued](#), for all of his faults, Donald Trump’s presidency has pushed Americans to question whether their traditional foreign policy approach has actually been effective.

In any event, a Biden administration would unlikely be able to put the proverbial genie back in the bottle. Stretching back to at least the Obama administration, if not prior, the US faces a deep international scepticism regarding its foreign policy commitments and its place in the world, notably among core strategic allies. For one, the Democrats have made it clear that they will continue to [prioritise](#) domestic economic concerns, although the approach would likely be more consultative than what has been witnessed over the course of the last four years.

A Trump victory would almost certainly accelerate the US down its current path and accentuate the transactional geopolitics adopted as part of the Trumpian approach to international relations. This would entail a further weakening of international institutions, which already seem to be becoming more irrelevant by the day as a result of the return of great power competition and the short to medium term disorder brought on by the shift towards multipolarity in the international system.



U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo (L) and Japanese Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi (R) talk during the Japan-US Foreign Ministers in Tokyo, Japan on October 06, 2020, prior to Japan-U.S.-Australia-India Foreign Ministers' Meeting the same day to affirm their commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific region as a counter to China's growing clout in the region. (David MAREUIL - Anadolu Agency)

Climate Change

Climate change arguably remains the most pressing long-term challenge for the US and the world as a whole. With regards to foreign policy concerns, it is the potential for the consequences of climate change to intersect with geopolitical developments that make it such a pressing issue. In other words, the challenge presented by climate change to strategic outlooks comes from the possibility that states will be unable to effectively manage and anticipate in ways that will advance their interests, preserve prosperity and maintain stability in the international arena. From migration to security, the consequences of climate change and climate-related issues will increasingly become a tipping point, presenting a significant challenge to whoever the next US President will be.

This is one area in particular where the Biden and Trump camps seemingly offer starkly different visions of the way forward for US policy. President Trump has expressed [scepticism](#) towards human-caused climate change and has championed the oil and gas industry in the US. He withdrew the US from the Paris Agreement on climate change and has sought to [reverse](#) environmental regulations enacted under the Obama administration. By contrast, Joe Biden, who has [said](#) that climate change is “the greatest threat to our security” and the Democrats in general have proposed [ambitious plans](#) to shift the American economy away from fossil fuels. Biden’s nearly \$2 billion proposal to fight climate change has unsurprisingly proven to be a political flashpoint, particularly as Biden himself recently acknowledged that it would involve the transitioning of the country away from the oil industry. However, as Coral Davenport recently argued in the [New York Times](#):

“no one knows better than Mr. Biden [...] that it almost surely will not be enacted, even if his party secures the White House and the Senate. Thirty-six years in the Senate and the searing experience of watching the Obama administration’s less ambitious climate plan die a decade ago have taught him the art of the possible.”

Particular in the wake of the ongoing economic crisis brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic, a Biden administration will in all likelihood have to walk back some of the more ambitious elements of the proposal, much to the disappointment of progressives in the Democratic party.

The flip side of climate change is of course the potential for the growth of new markets and new resources. While Trump has pushed for new pipelines and has reversed Obama-era decisions to deny permits for both the [Keystone XL](#) and Dakota Access pipelines, sought to open previously [protected](#) waters and lands to oil and gas drilling and [weakened](#) car industry standards for fuel efficiency, Biden’s proposals have envisioned up to [\\$17 trillion](#) in government spending on clean energy as well as a carbon tax and other carrot and stick measures to reduce

US fossil fuel reliance while simultaneously building its green energy infrastructure. In addition to the challenges of implementing such an ambitious plan, it is important to note that the US is already [significantly behind](#) other large players, notably China and the EU when it comes to climate change mitigation and the development of viable renewable and green technology. In any event, international engagement with a view of advancing the US position vis-à-vis investments in new technologies and the markets will be a key challenge for the next occupant of the White House.

The Middle East

Today’s Middle East has been shaped by powerful social, political and economic cards, many of which have involved the US in one way or another. From the ongoing conflicts in Syria and Yemen to Iran and Israeli-Arab relations, whoever the next US president is will have significant, if different, implications for US engagement in the Middle East.

For whoever becomes president in January, several key issues will dominate his foreign policy agenda as it relates to the Middle East. These include Iran, the relationship with Saudi Arabia, the Israeli-Palestinian and the broader Israeli-Arab issue, ongoing wars in Yemen and Syria, and [countering Russia and China](#), particularly as American influence in the region continues to wane.

Despite the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, Russia has continued to lay the foundation of a long-term presence in the Middle East. From Syria to Libya, Russia has emerged as a major player in the region and has sought to drive wedges between the US and some of its traditional allies in the region. Moreover, ongoing geopolitical shifts in the region have allowed Russia to achieve a level of influence not seen since the Soviet days. Russia’s growing military and diplomatic relations with US allies including [Egypt](#) and several [Gulf states](#) will present a challenge for the next US President, the response to which will significantly impact US standing among regional states. While popular wisdom has it that Russia has taken advantage of what many see as America’s wavering stance in the region under Trump, it should be remembered that it was the Obama administration that effectively [facilitated](#) Russia’s forceful re-entrance into regional affairs via its intervention in Syria through its seeking to avoid what Andrew Exum, a former Obama-era official described as a scenario of ‘catastrophic success’. According to [testimony](#) Exum gave to Congress in May 2019: “we worried that the Assad regime might finally collapse – and do so quickly, in a way that would endanger US interests, to include the security of the state of Israel.” Given the strategic realignment towards Asia that began in earnest under the Obama administration, the US is arguably no longer willing to match Russian investments on the ground in regional hotspots from Syria to Libya.

Regarding US withdrawal from the Middle East, it appears, that US-inaction in the region, for example by refusing to forcefully defend Saudi Arabia following the devastating attack against the Abqaiq oil facilities, has stimulated a shift towards realism among the Gulf states in particular. This has led to a realisation that they must move to develop more regionally-based solutions to the region's problems. This realisation is arguably a main motivating factor behind [de-escalation measures](#) with Iran, particularly by Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Given this, it is possible a more forceful US presence in the region could, somewhat ironically, actually lead to renewed escalation.

Arab-Israeli Relations

Governments in the region are well aware of the potential impact either a Trump or a Biden presidency would have on their relations with the US and have continued to maintain close ties with the Trump administration while also positioning themselves vis-à-vis a potential Biden presidency. The timing of the recent announcement of the signing of the 'Abraham Accords' between Israel, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain is a case in point. Regardless of how the deal was presented, it provided both its signatories and Donald Trump a political boost. For the UAE in particular, the timing of the deal not only gave Trump – with whom the UAE has enjoyed a close relationship – a foreign policy victory that would play well among his base but also allowed them to score points with a potential President Biden, who has [called](#) for Arab states to normalise their relations with Israel.

Consistent with traditional US policy, Biden has [opposed](#) Israeli annexation of the West Bank, the suspension of which formed a significant part of the justification of the normalisation deal. While Trump has gone beyond the traditional US position by recognising Jerusalem as the Israeli capital as well as Israeli control over the Golan Heights, an approach that would likely be retained in the event of a Trump re-election, a Biden presidency would more than

likely be consistent with the US approach under the second Obama term that saw engagement done primarily through international alliances while pushing the arguably now-defunct two-state solution. While Biden has not openly supported Israeli moves to annex East Jerusalem, he is unlikely to reverse Trump's recognition of the city as "Israel's eternal capital".

Iran

Iran is one area where there is a major substantive difference between the approaches a Trump or Biden presidency is likely to take. Under a second Trump term, the 'maximum pressure' approach to the Iranian issue, which included the 2018 withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal and the 2020 assassination of Qassem Soleimani, would in all likelihood continue, leading to an increased risk of serious miscalculation with the potential of sparking a conflict in the Gulf.

Biden has described Trump's approach to Iran as a "[self-inflicted disaster](#)" and has argued that Trump's withdrawal from the nuclear deal has not actually inhibited the advancement of Iran's nuclear programme. With a return to the JCPOA framework being a stated Biden policy objective, a Biden administration would seek to reverse Trump-era policies towards the Islamic Republic, while maintaining pressure (for example by including restrictions on Iran's ballistic missile programme as part of any new deal) in order to convince Iran to back off from what Biden also views as its destabilising approach to the region. In a point of irony that should not go unmentioned, it was the JCPOA negotiations under Obama that provided a significant stimulus to the Israeli-Gulf normalisation we are seeing today. Although any potential Iran nuclear deal 2.0 would likely include more input from regional stakeholders, it remains to be seen how Israel and Saudi Arabia, two-key regional US allies, would respond to such an initiative.



U.S. President Donald Trump (2nd R), Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (2nd L), UAE Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan (R) and Bahrain Foreign Minister Abdullatif bin Rashid Al Zayani (L) attend a signing ceremony for the agreements on "normalization of relations" reached between Israel, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain at the White House in Washington, on September 15, 2020. (The White House / Joyce N. Boghosian · Anadolu Agency)

US-Saudi Relations

US-Saudi relations under the Trump administration, particularly since the ascent of Crown Prince Mohamed bin Salman (MBS), have arguably risen to historically strong levels. However, a relationship traditionally premised on a deep network of shared interests has become more politicised and personalised over the course of the last four years. Against the better judgement of the US intelligence community, along with other senior political figures in the US, Trump unabashedly supported MBS in the wake of the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, a US resident and a regular contributor to the Washington Post. Under the backdrop of his 'America First' approach to international relations, Trump sidestepped the Khashoggi issue, pointing to weapons sales to the Kingdom worth billions. Moreover, amid a worsening humanitarian crisis in Yemen, he [vetoed](#) legislation that would have seen US arms sales to Saudi Arabia blocked.

As mentioned, while Saudi-US relations have arguably grown stronger in recent years, driven in part by the personal relationship between MBS and Trump, this is something that the Crown Prince cannot necessarily depend on should Trump lose. However, given the volume of shared interests and the close relationship between the US and the Saudi royals over years, regardless of a re-set in the approach to Saudi Arabia that would likely accompany a Biden presidency, the relationship will undoubtedly remain an important one for both parties. According to an anonymous [Gulf source](#) with knowledge of the situation quoted by Reuters, "there will be challenges but there are long-term strategic institutional relationships and no one wants to break the camel's back, though a Biden administration will want compromises."

For his part, Joe Biden has been fairly candid about what he sees as the need for a "[reassessment](#)" of US-Saudi relations. In particular, he has been critical not only of the Khashoggi saga but also the war in Yemen, saying that the US should end any involvement in what he termed as an "[unwinnable](#)" conflict. A long-time critic of the Kingdom, having blamed the country in 2014 for facilitating the flow of resources to Daesh, he has openly mentioned that as president, he would treat Riyadh like a "[pariah](#)" on the international stage.

Political rhetorical aside, this may be largely attributable to pre-election pandering to particular interest groups and certain elements of the Democratic voter base and therefore unlikely to drastically impact the state of US-Saudi relations. [According](#) to a foreign diplomat in the region, "I imagine Biden would demand a few high-profile concessions... something on women's rights defenders." A key Biden advisor, Daniel Benaïm, has called for a 're-set' rather than a 're-think' of relations, something that lends itself to this interpretation. As part of this 're-set', a Biden adminis-

tration may push for an end to the war in Yemen and the blockade on Qatar, something that the Saudis would be open to given their current predicament.

While the US no longer relies on oil from the Middle East and Saudi Arabia in particular, its stake in maintaining the international economic order means that it has a vested interest in ensuring a secure flow of energy from the region to the rest of the world, something that will keep them engaged in the region for years to come. Moreover, the fact that there is a distinct possibility that MBS will ascend to the throne in the coming four years, whether Trump or Biden occupies the White House come January will have a significant impact on the dynamics of US-Saudi relations.

China

Of all the foreign policy issues at stake in this election, US-China relations are among the most significant with regards to how the issue is received both domestically and internationally. While the growing strategic rivalry between the US and China will undoubtedly continue to intensify, it remains to be seen whether this will amount to a more confrontational approach or one where there are systems set up to ease potentially dangerous points of tension and where issue-based cooperation remains a possibility.

Since 2012, Chinese President Xi Jinping has [consolidated](#) his power at the expense of the Chinese Communist Party's traditionally consensual approach to governance. Under Xi, China has increasingly used its growing economic power as a coercive tool in international relations.



Graffitis of U.S. President Donald Trump and President of the People's Republic of China Xi Jinping wearing face mask to draw attention to novel coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic at Mauerpark in Berlin, Germany on April 27, 2020. (Abdulhamid Hoşbaş - Anadolu Agency)

The Trump administration has taken a confrontational approach towards China, particularly on the economic front. Trump's 'America First' mantra has been used to justify aggressive action with regards to perceived Chinese transgressions, which allegedly include economic espionage and export subsidies, that are seen to be harmful to US economic interests. On the political front, the Trump administration has taken a tough stand against China on regional issues, such as in the South China Sea where the US under Trump announced that it [rejected](#) almost all of China's territorial claims, accusing Beijing of engaging in a "campaign of bullying". More recent escalations in tensions, including the abrupt [closing](#) of the Chinese consulate in Houston, is an indication of what is to come should Trump manage to secure re-election.

Biden has sought to [frame](#) China's rise as a serious strategic challenge to the US and has criticised Chinese trade practices as well as its human rights record, reflecting his more traditional approach to international relations. Biden has said that he would seek to push back against China by working more closely with allies to pressure Beijing.

It is important to note that, regardless of who wins the White House, US-China competition will inevitably continue to rise. Moreover, there is a growing consensus in Washington DC that the US must be more assertive in its approach to countering China or risk falling behind in several key areas, a fact that is reflected in the increasing calls for protectionism and a return to industrial policy, particularly in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Given that polling data shows a significant deterioration in American perceptions towards China in the last four years, it is no wonder that both candidates have indicated that Chinese behaviour in the international arena is a problem. Domestically, Biden is seeking to ensure that he is seen as 'being tough' of China as part of the competition for undecided and independent voters in the so-called 'rust belt' of the upper Mid-West. Although a Biden administration would likely seek to 're-set' relations with China to some extent given the current level of tensions, on the China file at least, a Biden presidency would be more of a [difference in approach](#), rather than objective.

Conclusion

Foreign policy may not be a primary concern for US voters, but it is a realm over which the US President is granted near-exclusive authority. While relative US power is arguably not what it has been in decades past, it remains a fact that foreign policy decisions taken in Washington often have tremendous consequences for the rest of the world. For better or worse, most states do not have the luxury of ignoring US foreign policy. This is perhaps truer today than ever given ongoing geopolitical shifts including the rise of China, an increasingly emboldened and revisionist Russia, climate change and, of course, global pandemics.

Donald Trump's unpredictable approach to foreign policy has served to intensify the known unknowns accompanying these shifts. The continuation of his eclectic unpredictability, which includes a mix of unilateralism, protectionism, aggressiveness in the international arena and seeming disdain for many of America's traditional relationships, is perhaps the only certainty of a second Trump term in office. While a Biden presidency would surely see a return to a more [traditional US approach](#) to international affairs, it would be naïve to assume that the issues underlying the shifts, not only globally, but within America, itself, will simply go away. Domestically, the constituency that brought Trump to power and supports his agenda has been emboldened and will undoubtedly outlast him. Globally, shifts in the international order have been underway for some time and cannot simply be undone by the will of the US President, even if he or she should so wish.

The result is that states, and international institutions will be faced with increasingly challenging decisions vis-à-vis their relationships with the United States. Regardless of the hope some have placed in a return to normalcy under a Biden presidency, the reality is that much of the world, at least in the short term, may be faced with a choice of lesser evils in their respective approaches to international relations. On many issues Biden represents a substantial break from the approach of Donald Trump and while a Biden presidency may help soften the sharper edges of the emerging global dynamic, structural issues in the US and globally entail that, in the long run, the difference between Trump and Biden may be more style than substance.