

# Biden's foreign policy – the changes and the constraints

At the 100th day mark, it's clear his administration has adopted a more collaborative approach to allies and partners, but the corollary is that the US expects more of them too



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For *The Straits Times*

What can we conclude about US President Joe Biden's foreign policy as he marks his first 100 days in office this week? To state my conclusion upfront: Like all recent presidents, structural factors will constrain the extent to which he can change policies.

Like his two immediate predecessors, Mr Biden's primary priorities are domestic. The immediate imperatives are the health and economic consequences of the pandemic. His US\$1.9 trillion (S\$2.5 trillion) American Rescue Plan passed Congress in record time. The roll-out of the vaccination programme has been impressive. More than half of all American adults received at least one Covid-19 dose, and a third were fully vaccinated as at April 18, demonstrating yet again that while the United States is almost always slow to react to crises, it moves decisively when it bestirs itself.

But Mr Biden's longer-term US\$2.25 trillion infrastructure Bill is not assured of success. His margins in both chambers of Congress are very narrow.

## THE CHINA CONSENSUS

To build support, he has explicitly linked his infrastructure Bill to competition with China. This is the only issue that commands a bipartisan consensus and widespread public support. Mr Biden was Mr Barack Obama's vice-president, and most of his key security and foreign policy officials also served Mr Obama. They are acutely aware that Mr Obama, particularly in his second term, was considered weak on China. They are determined not to be regarded as Obama 2.0.

President Biden has not fundamentally changed Mr Donald Trump's approach. The process by which policies towards China are made and communicated by the Biden administration is more orderly, but so far there is no shift in the basic trajectory of US-China relations, whether in trade, technology transfers or, above all, in the exercise of hard power in the

East China Sea, the South China Sea (SCS) and over Taiwan.

Despite the US and China pledging cooperation on climate change, competition will not be de-emphasised as it was during Mr Obama's second term. The Biden administration has described its approach towards China as cooperation, competition and, as needed, confrontation.

Neither does China want to fundamentally change the trajectory of its relationship with the US unless it is done on its own terms. Like the US, China's main considerations are domestic. With the 100th anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party this year and the crucial 20th party congress next year, Beijing also does not want to look weak.

Politics is not the only driver of Mr Biden's approach to China. There are deeper structural causes.

Despite some tense episodes, from China's 2001 World Trade Organisation accession to Mr Obama's second term (2013 to 2017), American policies towards China were stabilised by the comforting delusion that economic reforms would inexorably lead to convergence of interests.

Former president George W. Bush first labelled China a "strategic competitor", but his administration was soon distracted by the 9/11 terror attacks. The promise of Mr Obama's "pivot" to Asia was undermined by the naivete of key officials, notably Mr John Kerry and Ms Susan Rice.

These delusions and distractions have dissipated. Few countries are eager to confront China. Nobody will ever shun China, which is an important economic partner to everyone. But China is nevertheless regarded with deep ambivalence. Not just the US, but Japan, Europe, India and Australia, among others, regard China as a "systemic competitor".

It was a mistake for China to have prematurely abandoned Deng Xiaoping's sage approach of "hiding light, and biding time". Once revealed, ambitions are not easily forgotten. Although the nature and intensity of concerns may vary, there is no major country – and not a few small countries too – that is without some degree of anxiety about Chinese behaviour.

## THE QUAD

Mr Biden was thus pushing on an open door when he re-engaged with the US' allies and partners. This was the key way in which his administration sought to distinguish itself from its predecessor. All the Biden



US President Joe Biden's more consultative approach towards partners and allies is welcome. But while he will certainly be far more polite than Mr Donald Trump, he is transactional in his own way, says the writer. PHOTO: EPA-EFE

administration's initial high-level contacts were with Asian allies. This was a shift away from the traditional priority accorded to the US' neighbours, Mexico and Canada, and Nato.

Mr Biden invigorated the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue by holding a virtual summit with the leaders of Japan, India and Australia last month. China, which once dismissed the Quad as "sea foam", is now anxiously inquiring whether South Korea will join it.

Mr Biden's more consultative approach towards allies and partners is welcome. But the corollary to consultation is the expectation that American allies and partners should work more closely with America. While he will certainly be far more polite than Mr Trump, he is transactional in his own way. Expectations of allies and partners are high.

Mr Trump was an extreme manifestation of another new structural feature of American foreign policy. Higher expectations of allies and partners are the logical consequence of the domestic focus of all administrations since Mr Obama's, coupled with relative shifts in the global distribution of power occasioned by China's rise.

Under Mr Trump, this new political mood was often misrepresented as a "retreat". It is more accurately understood as a recalibration of America's external engagements, with the US increasingly playing the role of offshore balancer rather than intervening directly. This has been its approach in Asia since the end of the Vietnam War. The US will never eschew military force, but the trend is towards more reliance on air and naval power rather than forward-deployed ground forces.

Mr Biden is clearly less hostile than Mr Trump towards multilateral institutions and international rules; he moved swiftly to rejoin the Paris accord on climate change. But multilateral institutions and international law are not the entire toolkit of American statecraft. The American attitude towards multilateralism has been ambivalent across many administrations of both parties. Mr Biden will use or not use these particular tools as appropriate, and we should not assume that he will instinctively reach for them under all circumstances.

A hundred days is too short to definitively assess how the new structural realities I have briefly sketched will play out during the next four years. But South-east Asia, Europe and the Middle East could be particularly affected.

## ASEAN'S TEST

As the strategic crossroads between the Indian and Pacific oceans, South-east Asia is the epicentre of US-China competition. It would, however, be a serious mistake for Asean to conclude that this automatically makes it "central" to US foreign policy in all but the trite geographic sense.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken, National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan and Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin understand Asia's importance, but do not have deep experience of Asean. Indo-Pacific coordinator Kurt Campbell understands Asean very well, but his is a new appointment, and it is still unclear how he will relate to the other parts of the complex American foreign and defence policy apparatus.

If Asean's performance disappoints, the US and its Indo-Pacific allies and partners can secure their interests in South-east Asia alone or through bilateral relationships, with only lip service to Asean centrality.

The Myanmar coup was an early test. So far, Asean has performed credibly. The recently concluded Asean summit exceeded expectations, but was only a first step in what will be a long and fraught process. Handled creatively, Myanmar could enhance Asean's reputation with a new generation of American officials, as did the Cambodian issue in the 1980s. The converse is, unfortunately, also true.

## EUROPE'S CHALLENGE

Europe faces an analogous and perhaps even more serious situation. Every post-Cold War US administration has asked Europe to bear more of the burden of its own security. With very few exceptions – primarily France and the United Kingdom – the Europeans have always disappointed.

The European Union is a security free-rider, its members incapable of mustering the political courage to restructure their social model in order to increase defence budgets. Nato without the US is hollow.

Post-Soviet Russia is not an existential threat to America. The primary challenge is China. Unless Europe bears more responsibility for its own defence and cooperates with the US on China, sooner or later the US will further draw down its ground forces in Europe.

Mr Trump's threat to withdraw forces from Germany was an early indicator. But the EU is mistaken if it thinks that Mr Biden's patience is infinite or that emphasising common trans-Atlantic values is an adequate substitute for action.

A few EU members recognise this. France, Germany and the Netherlands have issued White Papers on their Indo-Pacific policies. France considers itself an Indo-Pacific "resident power" and regularly deploys its navy to the region. Its February announcement that a French nuclear attack submarine was exercising in the SCS notched the French position higher. Germany intends to deploy a frigate to the region. The UK's new aircraft carrier is expected to visit the SCS.

The EU as a whole is moving – glacially – towards a common position on the Indo-Pacific. But whether a common EU position without the capability to back it is enough to assuage Mr Biden and future US presidents is uncertain.

## MIDDLE EAST REALITIES

The Middle East is where changes seem most obvious. Talks to rejoin Mr Obama's nuclear deal with Iran have begun. Mr Biden has restored US funding to the United Nations relief agency for Palestine. He has criticised Saudi Arabia's human rights abuses. He has announced the withdrawal of all US forces from Afghanistan. But in reality, his Middle East options are limited.

The involvement of US ground forces in Afghanistan and other countries in the Middle East was a mistake every US president since Mr Obama has tried to correct. There is no indication that the Fifth Fleet will withdraw from Bahrain or that the US air force will leave Qatar. Mr Biden has not rescinded Mr Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital. His gesture to the Palestinians does not erase the hard reality that the Fatah and Hamas parties have no real interest in a solution because a solution will make them accountable for their dismal failures of governance. Mr Biden is expected to moderate but not ban arms sales to Saudi Arabia.

Restarting the nuclear deal with Iran will be very difficult, particularly since Mr Biden had pledged to enhance it. But there is a more fundamental contradiction. As a longstanding supporter of Israel, Mr Biden has urged more Arab states to join the Abraham Accords to recognise Israel. But that agreement, which could not have been concluded if Saudi Arabia had been opposed, is a de facto anti-Iran alliance. Even in the unlikely event of a deal, Iran under the mullahs will still be hostile to America.

Given the parlous state of most of the Middle East, and Turkey's anti-Western stance under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, America's most viable partners are still Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Mr Biden can calibrate but not shift policy towards these countries.

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