

# Strategic Analysis Paper

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## US Ties to Allies under the Biden Administration

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### Key Points

- Some of the first Executive Orders signed by President Biden indicate that he favours multilateralism and a more outward-looking US.
- Some analysts argue that we may witness a return to a pre-Trump US engagement with the outside world.
- Biden cannot ignore ground realities, however, as the world order in 2021 is quite different to that of 2017.
- An inward-looking economic narrative and the ties of some US allies to Russia and China are likely to emerge as major challenges.

### Summary

Several commentators have argued that US President Joe Biden's emphasis on multilateralism, liberalism and his focus on mending ties with the US's allies indicate a return to the pre-Trump era. Biden, after taking office, has signed a number of important executive orders, such as returning the US to [the Paris Climate Agreement and remaining part of the World Health Organization](#) (WHO), which indicates that the US will not be as "isolationist" and as averse to multilateralism as it was during the Trump Administration; the former President had been scathing in his criticism of the [UN](#) and [NATO](#), much to the chagrin of many US allies.

It is also likely that the US may re-join the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA, or the Iran nuclear agreement). Time is running out in that regard, however, since Iran goes to the polls in June and its hardliners have grown emboldened by Biden's refutation of some of the

Trump Administration's measures, such as the imposition of sanctions on Iran and increasing its animosity towards Tehran during its last weeks in office. Members of Biden's team have also made it clear that re-joining the Iran nuclear deal right away will not be easy. In fact, speaking at his [confirmation hearing](#), Secretary of State Anthony Blinken noted, 'We are a long way from there.'

Biden, a quintessential Beltway insider, is likely to be more conservative in his approach towards foreign policy than the more transactional and mercurial Trump.

## Analysis

### ***Changing Geopolitical Realities***

The reality is that 2021 is very different from 2017. That was clearly evident in Biden's inauguration speech, in which his stated focus was on the domestic political, economic and social challenges that America faces, and the dire need to deal with the fissures within American society.

Apart from that, US-China ties have witnessed a significant downward spiral in the last four years and, although Washington had begun to recognise the China challenge before then, the US-China trade war and Beijing's increasing aggression towards the rest of Asia have only exacerbated tensions.

### ***Approach vis-à-vis China***

During the election campaign Biden spoke about building an international campaign to '[pressure, isolate and punish China](#)'. The statements of some senior members of his team, including Secretary of State Anthony Blinken and Indo-Pacific Co-ordinator in the National Security Council, Kurt Campbell, who was one of the key architects of Obama's "Pivot to Asia" strategy, appear to imply that the Biden Administration will take a hard line vis-à-vis China. Both Blinken and Campbell have supported a strong approach towards China, although there will likely be differences with Trump's [style](#) of dealing with Beijing. Some of those differences could lie in identifying areas where the US and China can and should work together. [Defence Secretary](#) Lloyd Austin, during his hearing with the Senate Armed Services Committee, similarly noted that China was a 'pacing threat' for the US.

General Austin, in his first [conversation](#) with the Japanese Foreign Minister, Nobuo Kishi, [stated unequivocally](#) that the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea fall under Article V of the US-Japan Security Treaty, which states that the US will defend territories under Japanese Administration in case of any armed attack.

### ***US Will Work With Allies***

Biden, Blinken and Campbell have stated that the US will need to work jointly with allies to confront the security threats that China poses. After his appointment, Gen. Austin spoke to his counterparts in Asia, and reiterated the importance of a [Free and Open Indo-Pacific](#).

Campbell also made the point in an essay that it is unfair for the US to expect its allies to choose between the [US and China](#). This is a fundamentally different approach from the Trump Administration's where, on issues like Huawei and 5G, many allies complained about the US being overbearing. The [UK](#), for instance, initially allowed Chinese telecommunications firm Huawei to provide hardware for its 5G network in 2020, much to the chagrin of the Trump Administration. In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in a deterioration of ties between the UK and China, however, the Johnson Government decided that Huawei equipment would be banned in the UK's 5G communications networks and existing Huawei hardware removed by [2022](#).

Like Biden, Campbell has referred to the need for the US to [take note](#) of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and China's growing economic clout. An important component of Obama's "Pivot to Asia" strategy was the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP), from which the US withdrew under Trump, leaving China free to replace it with the RCEP. The problem that the new administration will face is that creating trade agreements, even with allies, will not be easy and re-joining the TPP at this stage is virtually impossible.

On Iran, too, the US is likely to work with other signatories to the JCPOA, especially the UK, Germany and France. The Foreign Ministers of the other countries that were original signatories to the deal met in December, which again leaves the US as an outsider and relative newcomer.

### ***Will There Be No Differences?***

Do Biden's commitment to multilateralism and his stance on alliances indicate that the frictions with allies will disappear? There are likely to be differences over economic issues, since Biden cannot go against the prevalent economic narrative. Like Trump's "America First" narrative, Biden too has a "Made in America" and "Buy American" vision, according to which a fillip will be given to American manufacturing and a preference to American goods, especially for government contracts, which would make [Canada one of the biggest losers](#). Biden has also spoken about attracting greater investments into the US technology sector to counter China and not just impose bans on the export of technology to that country.

Some differences between the US and its allies are likely to persist in a changed global atmosphere. For instance, the EU has agreed in principle to an investment agreement with China. Known as the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment, it came in for scathing criticism from the Trump Administration and Europe deliberately rejected Biden's request not to enter into it. Former US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, commenting on the deal, said that the agreement 'didn't protect the European workers from the predation of the Chinese Communist Party, and they get to make their own decisions.' Recently, however, there have been [objections](#) to the agreement from within the [European Parliament](#) on account of China's human rights abuses and the fact that the agreement could sour ties with the Biden Administration.

China, on the other hand, has portrayed the agreement as a major diplomatic triumph and also as a means of creating a rift between the US and EU.

While no comments were made by the Biden Administration, it has repeatedly spoken in favour of a '[co-ordinated approach](#)' towards China.

### **Russia**

The US is likely to have divergent views with allies not just over ties with China, but over Russia as well. Anthony Blinken has already expressed his opposition to the Nord Stream 2 pipeline (a Russia-Germany gas pipeline) and stated that the Biden Administration would do whatever it takes to convince the EU from going ahead with that project. German Chancellor Angela Merkel has indicated that the issue of the pipeline and related sanctions will be discussed with the Biden White House; [Washington has imposed sanctions on the ship laying the final parts of the pipeline and its owner](#). As Ms Merkel said:

... it is also not the case that there are no trade relations at all between the United States and Russia in the oil sector, for example. That means we have to put all this on the table and talk about whether we want to have no more trade with Russia in the gas sector, what level of dependence is tolerable.

It is not just with the EU, but also with India, that Russia is likely to be a thorny issue. How, for instance, will Washington and New Delhi reconcile India's purchase of Russia's S-400 missile defence system? While the Biden Administration is likely to find common ground with India in regard to China and the [Indo-Pacific concept](#) (as was highlighted by Anthony [Blinken](#) after his conversation with Indian Foreign Minister, S. Jaishankar), and Indo-US economic relations have the potential to further improve, India's purchase of the Russian S-400 missiles could result in Washington sanctioning it under the Countering America's Adversaries through Sanctions Act (CAATSA). While the Trump Administration had opposed imposing CAATSA sanctions against allies – Jim Mattis, who served as Defence Secretary until January 2019, had argued in favour of a waiver from CAATSA for US allies like [India and Vietnam](#) – it imposed sanctions on Turkey, a fellow NATO member, for purchasing the same system from Russia. Washington apparently recognised that India, for long, has shared close defence relations with Russia, and depended on it for much of its defence imports, even though, in recent years, security ties with and purchases of military hardware from the US have witnessed a significant rise. Defence imports from the US rose to well over [US\\$3 billion](#) in 2020.

Officials at the US Embassy in New Delhi have, however, alluded to sanctions being imposed on India for the purchase of the S-400 anti-missile defence system. Former US Ambassador to India, Kenneth Juster, in his farewell speech, indicated that India needed to make its choices. [Anthony Blinken](#), who referred to India as a 'bi-partisan success' during his confirmation hearing, while commenting on Turkey's purchase of S-400 missiles, stated:

The idea that a strategic – so-called strategic – partner of ours would actually be in line with one of our biggest strategic competitors in Russia is not acceptable.

Commenting on the purchase of the S-400 system from Russia and the remarks of the former US Ambassador to India, a senior official of India's Ministry of External Affairs stated

that 'India and the US have a comprehensive global strategic partnership. India has a special and privileged strategic partnership with Russia.'

### **Conclusion**

Biden may be more predictable and less transactional than Trump, but the world order has witnessed a significant change. Moreover, while the new US president has made working with allies and multilateralism a priority, his primary challenges are domestic. While on some issues, ties with allies are likely to improve, differences will remain on a myriad of others, since every country has its own interests. And, while there has been talk about the bipartisan nature of India-US ties, as well as the fact that China is a common threat, it remains to be seen how Washington and New Delhi will reconcile their differences over dealings with Russia.

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