

IN BIDEN'S POLICY PURSUIT, THE WORLD ORDER CHALLENGE

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

Some of the remarks by Joe Biden, now the United States President, during the U.S. presidential election campaign have come to haunt him. He had, in August 2019, been a strident critic of the U.S. withdrawal from the nuclear agreement with Iran, formally the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). He had then promised that, [subject to Iran's compliance with its obligations](#), the U.S. would re-enter the agreement.

Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, in a recent [Foreign Affairs article](#), has reminded Mr. Biden of his commitment and called on him to end the "failed policies" of the earlier administration that had made West Asia "the most militarised region in the world". He also warned that "containment" of Iran would not work.

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Israel has given the opposite message: its armed forces commander, Lt. Gen. Aviv Kochavi, in a belligerent speech on January 26, said that the nuclear agreement was "bad and must not be allowed". He added that Israel had operational plans to take "decisive action". Israel and the U.S.'s Gulf allies, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, have also insisted that they be involved with the discussions with Iran on the revival of the agreement.

In office, Mr. Biden has shown little urgency on the JCPOA matter. Clearly, there are some serious issues at stake here. Despite the sanctions, Iran's regional influence remains significant, based on the backing of Shia militia in such diverse locales as Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen and Syria. The Iranian ability to mobilise militants across the region is viewed by Israel and some the Gulf Arab states as threatening their security, the latter being concerned about Iran's influence with their Shia populations as well.

The capabilities of Iran's precision missiles and drones are also a matter of regional anxiety. Iran has focused on the domestic development of missiles due to international sanctions on defence supplies. Iran views them as defensive assets that give it a deterrence capability. Given the advanced air and missile power available with Israel, Saudi Arabia and some other Gulf states, there is no prospect of Iran curtailing its missiles and drone programmes.

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Mr. Biden in office has already revealed that despite some differences in policy content and diplomatic style, his term is likely to show more continuity than change where the U.S.'s core interests are concerned, specifically in its ties with Russia, China and Iran.

For instance, in his CBS interview on February 7, Mr. Biden said he had not spoken to the Chinese President, Xi Jinping, who "doesn't have a democratic bone in his body", and anticipated "extreme competition" on global economic issues. The U.S. Secretary of State, Antony J. Blinken, was tough with his counterpart in their telephonic conversation, and raised "human rights and democratic values" in the context of Xinjiang, Tibet and Hong Kong.

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Again, Mr. Biden is likely to reverse his predecessor Donald Trump's personal accommodative approach towards Russia and adopt the U.S.'s traditional confrontational posture. The White House said that, in his conversation with Russian President Vladimir Putin on January 26, he made it clear that the U.S. "will act firmly in defence of our national interests in response to actions by Russia" and brought up Ukraine, the cyber attacks and the poisoning of Russian Opposition leader Alexei Navalny.

Mr. Biden's Iran policy is likely to match Mr. Trump's hardline approach on substantive matters, but without the bravado and crude brinkmanship of the former President. On January 29, the Pentagon spokesperson described Iran as a "malign actor" in the region, referred to Iran's "active ballistic missiles" programmes, the fact that it is still "re-spinning centrifuges", and highlighted the need to protect the U.S.'s regional partners from Iran's "acts of terrorism" — these issues and the accompanying rhetoric are the same as those of the Trump administration. This approach also panders to Iran's regional rivals who wish to see the Islamic republic emasculated and isolated.

There will thus be no dramatic change in the U.S.'s approach to Iran on the nuclear question. The appointment of a Special Envoy for Iran, Robert Malley, suggests that the U.S. is looking at a long-term diplomatic engagement not just on nuclear issues but on all matters that have security implications for the U.S. and its regional partners.

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To encourage this dialogue, the U.S. could offer some palliatives to Iran, such as International Monetary Fund providing funds to combat the novel coronavirus pandemic, but with no early easing of sanctions on oil sales. Iran may quickly find that it has to largely depend on its own resources to manage its interests at home and in the region. Its elections in June could thus put in place leaders who see no benefits in working cooperatively with western powers.

Battle lines will thus remain in place in the region — Israel, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates will be in a face-off with Iran and its allies, Iraq, Syria and its Shia militia — in a prolonged war of attrition that does not resolve any issue, but continues to wreak death and destruction.

Alternatively, we could see a genuine regional effort to ease tensions and promote regional confidence, spearheaded by Qatar, working with Russia and, possibly, China. Qatar's Foreign Minister has already proposed direct engagement with Iran. Perhaps, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, already facing heat from the Biden administration, will see the value of this approach as they had done during heightened tensions in the Gulf waters in 2019: the UAE had then discussed maritime security with Iran, while Saudi Arabia had encouraged mediation efforts by regional states.

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As Mr. Biden pursues policies of an earlier era, he will find that much has changed in West Asia and the world since he was last in office. Not only is Russia now an influential player in the region, China, too, with its Belt and Road Initiative, has high stakes in regional stability. The Sino-Iran 25 years agreement, which was leaked last year, envisages their substantial and long-term cooperation in political, security, military, economic, energy and logistical connectivity areas. Its formal finalisation was deliberately postponed by both sides to see what the U.S. elections would throw up. With Mr. Biden being confrontational, they are likely to pursue this partnership more openly and robustly.

Mr. Biden will thus witness a new world order, shaped by a coalition of Russia, China and Iran, in which the U.S. is no longer the most significant role-player.

This tectonic change will define international affairs in coming decades.

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