



The U.S. Presidential Election and the Impact of a Biden Administration on U.S. Foreign Policy in the Middle East

Ghassan Shams*
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Introduction

The significance of the U.S. election on a global level cannot be understated as the U.S. alone controls approximately [25%](#) of world GDP, retains the top spot as the undisputed [military](#) power in the world, both quantitatively and qualitatively, and has a defense budget that is larger than most nations' GDPs at [\\$738 billion](#). The U.S. additionally plays an instrumental role in global governance due to its historical role in maintaining a leadership position in international organizations, multilateral treaties, and bilateral relations. The U.S. has also traditionally supported the rule of law, peaceful government transitions, and institutional capacity-building globally. Therefore, U.S. election results do not solely send messages globally on the role of the U.S. in the world, rather they signify to the world the role of democracy in the U.S., an image the U.S. has portrayed in its policies as idealistic. In this context, this article will examine the 2020 U.S. election process, the impact of the elections on foreign policy-making institutions, and policies we might expect following the inauguration of Joe Biden in January 2021.

Overview of the 2020 Presidential Election

The 2020 U.S. presidential election is particularly significant as the global arena of international affairs is experiencing shifting push and pull factors that will shape both immediate and long-term global governance paradigms and it is characteristically different from previous U.S. elections due to international and domestic variables under which the election is taking place. Domestically, the U.S. political scene has not been more polarized since the Civil War, as citizens remain divided on social, economic, and political issues across the political spectrum.

Additionally, The U.S. has been one of the hardest-hit nations by the Covid-19 pandemic, with approximately 238,000 deaths caused by the virus and about [10 million individuals](#) infected as of today. Economically, approximately [40 million](#) Americans suffered from job loss due to the wider economic effects of the pandemic, and the pandemic has also cost the U.S. economy approximately [\\$3 trillion](#). Globally, the U.S. faces various challenges and obstacles to maintain its leadership position in alliance networks and multilateral organizations. Namely, China's rise as a competing force in a bipolar world order, regional instability stemming from Tehran, heightened risks of terrorism, the slowdown in global economic growth, climate change, and indirect/direct cyber warfare. As such, this election comes at a more consequential time than ever in terms of both uniting the country to address domestic challenges while also harnessing the tools of state power to combat global threats to advance peace, security, prosperity, and stability. Furthermore, this election also had the highest voter turnout in the country's history, marking a significant turning point in American political engagement, with approximately [161 million votes](#) cast across the country.

Rather than through a direct popular vote system, the U.S. president is elected through the Electoral College, in which each state is allocated a certain number of votes based on population, and presidential candidates must win at least 270 electoral votes to take the majority and win the election. According to the [Associate Press](#), Biden has received majority votes and, therefore, has been declared the winner of the 2020 election, though the actual Electoral College vote will take place mid-

December. The election ultimately came down to a few key swing states such as Nevada, Arizona, Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania. The 77-year-old President-elect and his Vice President Kamala Harris will be sworn in at the Presidential inauguration in January 2021, marking a significant turning point in U.S. domestic politics as Kamala Harris will be the first female, first Black and first South Asian person in U.S. history to be elected Vice President of the United States.

However, President Trump has vocalized his concern about fraudulent activities surrounding the election process throughout his campaign. Prior to election day, he attributed risks associated with election integrity and election fraud prevention to foreign meddling in the vote tallying process, and he has specifically tried to delegitimize the increased number of mail-in votes as a result of the pandemic, claiming a large majority to be fraudulent. In essence, Trump has delegitimized the outcome of the election, which poses an inherent obstacle towards the resiliency of U.S. institutions, as a large segment of Trump supporters believe that the election was stolen, which has now led to widespread protests across the nation. Despite Trump's efforts to nullify the election, global leaders have welcomed the transition of power in the U.S. with enthusiasm as Biden portrays qualities of re-unifying global missions, actions, and visions towards achieving common objectives with U.S. allies.

How a Biden Presidency will impact U.S. Foreign Policy:

The Democratic Party, today, is not homogenous, and progressive party members, such as Bernie Sanders, have gained tremendous popularity among predominately young voters, seeking to make a change in the political and economic status quo. President-elect Joe Biden represents a more centrist and sometimes hawkish (such as voting in favor of the Iraq war) world-view than his previous Democratic running mates, yet to secure party unity, it is expected Biden will need to make specific provisions that appease the progressive Democrats. Though these provisions will focus more significantly on domestic issues, considerations will be made in foreign policy. Democrats have won the Presidency, Republicans are likely to keep control of the Senate, Democrats control the House, and there is 6-3 conservative Supreme Court. Both parties will also need to work together in the decision-making process of foreign policy.

The Biden Administration will take office in a challenging global environment caused by the most significant global health and security challenges in modern history. Therefore, addressing the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic (health and economic) both globally and domestically will occupy his presidency. The Biden Administration will emanate from the Obama Administration but will not necessarily be bound by Obama's foreign policy. For example, although Biden has pledged to renegotiate the JCPOA, he has outlined additional protocols and provisions that will be required as part of a renegotiation—for example, addressing Iran's ballistic missile program and interventionist policies. Looking towards the policy tools that Biden is likely to deploy to achieve his foreign policy objectives, the President-elect has previously portrayed a willingness to deploy troops for special operations that have a narrow objective. However, a Biden presidency will likely favor diplomacy through official and unofficial channels to co-opt and coerce allies and adversaries to advance U.S. strategic objectives. Biden's liberal worldview favors the use of and will foster the strength of international organizations and multilateral treaties. Therefore, his presidency is apt to reinvigorate US-NATO relations, and he will facilitate a U.S. return to the WHO while supporting other UN institutions. With regard to China, Biden is likely to address what he has argued to be Chinese malign regional activities, including domestic human rights abuses, and global cyber espionage. He could do this by enacting policies that address the specific challenges rather than the Trumpian approach of criminalizing China as a whole. Combatting the economic consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic will also be a priority in 2021, and working with China towards increasing global economic growth will be necessary for a nuanced policy approach in this regard. The conduct of U.S. foreign policy will likely be

grounded in international institutions established after World War II to achieve worldwide peace and prosperity.

Biden has pledged his return to the Paris Agreement and to re-establish U.S. commitment towards carbon neutrality to combat the existential threat climate change poses to the international community. Biden has stated that an investment of approximately [\\$2 trillion](#) is needed by the U.S. to make meaningful progress regarding combatting global warming. This will also strengthen Biden's efforts to re-establish trust and return to normal relations with European Union member countries. Trump has, since taking office, framed his political rhetoric and policies on an America First approach, which has resulted in unilateral actions, often against U.S. allies in Europe, such as the imposition of tariffs and the withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, which weakened EU support for U.S. policies. Biden views the EU as a vital partner for the United States, and therefore policies aimed at rebuilding trust and regaining U.S. credibility in that relationship will likely be prioritized by a Biden presidency.

Gulf Regional Outlook of President Biden's Foreign Policy:

Although Biden is exceptionally familiar with the Gulf region through his tenure as Senator and Vice President, during which he visited the region multiple times, and was involved in policymaking on major issues impacting the region, as President he will need to adjust policies based on the shifting geopolitical landscape in the region. Following his tenure as Vice President, we have seen more active interventionism by Iran and direct attacks on Saudi oil-tankers and oil installations. Iraq, which has dramatically transformed since his service, remains in a precarious situation while the new Prime Minister makes significant efforts to establish good governance, provide essential services, and institute rule of law of the country. On the southern border of Saudi Arabia, missiles continue to be launched from Yemen, targeting critical infrastructure, government installations, civilians and cities in the Kingdom. In Lebanon, Hezbollah wields an even tighter control of Lebanese citizen welfare. Finally, in Turkey, Erdogan has exhibited a neo-Ottoman approach towards foreign policy, advancing expansionist ambitions and backing non-state actors to tilt the balance of power in the region.

To combat Iran, Biden has expressed his commitment to returning to the JCPOA agreement with updated frameworks that are likely to address Iran's ballistic missile program, its support of proxies, and nuclear non-proliferation, with the ultimate aim of preventing conflict. This approach will allow for a cohesive approach towards establishing the framework of resolving the Iran crisis while preserving the interests of key U.S. allies in the region. The circumstances under which Iran negotiated the JCPOA agreement have also changed, with the country currently suffering a tremendous slowdown in economic activity and growing global attention on Iran's malign regional activities. Biden's regional policy should focus on the transition of the region from a context dominated by Iranian proxies willing and able to use violence and intimidation to destabilize countries, to a situation in which armed groups are subordinated by competent and legitimate governments, reintegrated into society, or defeated.

Additional changes in the regional landscape include the Abraham Accords. Biden is likely to establish confidence-building measures with Palestinians by renewing U.S. aid, re-opening the Palestinian Mission in Washington, and returning to traditional two-state solution positions and re-committing U.S. aid to UNRWA – all of which Saudi Arabia supports and views as prerequisites for any diplomatic discussions. The Kingdom has made its position clear in its commitment to the two-state solution presented in the Arab Peace Initiative. Nevertheless, one cannot expect too much; Biden will not draw-back on what Trump has done and is likely to focus his foreign policy on more imminent issues such as China, re-engaging in arms control treaties, and dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic.

While specific overarching themes of U.S. policy and the stakeholders involved in building systems remain, for the most part, foreign policy priorities naturally shift with each presidential administration. U.S.-Saudi relations specifically have received U.S. bipartisan support for decades, ever since formal relations were established when King Abdulaziz met with U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1945; the relationship has survived the coming and going of 14 U.S. presidents and seven party switches in the White House. Throughout the decades, U.S.-Saudi relations have only strengthened and continue to do so. Four significant pillars of continuity are represented in U.S.-Saudi relations, regardless of the political party in the White House. These pillars, which are regional security, counter-terrorism, energy, and global economic growth and prosperity, have served as common goals between both countries. For domestic and international players, President Trump's loss symbolizes a return towards more traditional decision-making and policy execution mechanisms that maximize U.S. policy and international institutions to their fullest extent and will likely return to the institutional and more traditional cooperation mechanisms in US-Saudi relations. The Saudi-U.S. security alliance is likely to continue beyond this election and towards the foreseeable future as a result of continued U.S. interests in the region, Saudi's willingness to continue to be a reliable ally to the U.S., and mutual interests in preserving stability in the region. Saudi Arabia remains the U.S.'s top trading partner in military equipment, which both Republican and Democrat administrations have always sought to protect.

The U.S. and Saudi Arabia also maintain a large partnership in trade, and Saudi Arabia provides approximately [one million barrels](#) per day of oil to the U.S. market. The concentration of trade routes surrounding Saudi Arabia in the Arabian Gulf and the Red Sea, places Saudi Arabia at the crossroads of the most important passages for the free-flow of U.S. goods globally. The United States and Saudi Arabia also signed a [Trade Investment Framework Agreement](#) to expand B2B relations and increase the flow of investments between both nations. Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 program lays out plans to diversify the Saudi economy, including increased trade and investment with the United States. Trade between the two nations is clearly an essential element of the relationship, with the flow of goods between the two nations in 2019 estimated at [\\$38.7 billion](#). The Covid-19 pandemic has economically impacted both nations, yet their economic institutions' resiliency and joint collaborative efforts have made swift recovery a possibility. Though the U.S. has recently become a net oil exporter, the concentration of oil reserves in Saudi Arabia makes the survival and prosperity of U.S. shale dependent on joint efforts between the two nations to set reasonable prices and stabilize oil markets, as most recently seen by Russia's refusal to participate in price setting. Both nations additionally rely on global economic stability and recovery to boost domestic economic growth.

U.S.-Saudi joint efforts towards counter-terrorism have exhibited a multi-layered approach, which targeted counter-terror financing, counter violent extremist ideologies, and counter-terrorism operations. Saudi Arabia participated in the coalition against ISIS led by the U.S. and continues to participate in intelligence sharing to identify threats and individuals associated with terror financing globally. Both countries have determined that violent extremism cannot only be addressed via military response, intelligence gathering, and law enforcement, but rather they have sought to create a comprehensive perspective that considers structural causes and addresses issues at the household level. The US-Saudi counter-terrorism strategy's main aim is to address the drivers of violent extremism, prevent violent attacks, and use a comprehensive framework that considers preventive and security elements for countering violent extremism. For example, the two nations' collaborative strategies, exchanging information on best practices to counter terrorism and joint operations, seek to identify the push and pull factors that lead to radicalization, countering terrorist cells, and preventing violent attacks. Intelligence sharing networks between the two countries are likely to remain firm under Biden, predominately as risks of terrorism are expected to be heightened in the short and medium-term.

In essence, while the priorities and conduct of U.S. foreign affairs are expected to differ from Trump to Biden, certain overarching policies are expected to remain unchanged. The Biden Administration will be confronted with various domestic and global policy challenges, such as combatting the health and economic consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic and reinstating U.S. commitments to the EU and NATO. In the Middle East, the Biden Administration will be confronted with regional realities and emerging threats stemming from Tehran that will require the continuity of certain sanctions imposed by the Trump Administration while the renegotiation of a comprehensive JCPOA agreement is underway. Domestically, the Biden Administration will be occupied with the challenge of uniting a divided nation around common values, interests and ideals.

**Ghassan Shams is a Researcher at GRC*