

What a Biden win would mean for Australia

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[Joe Biden looks to have scraped](#) into the most consequential American election victory since FDR beat Herbert Hoover in 1932. Australians who believe in the importance of a constructive US role in global affairs will be relieved but should not relax.

The world we knew – the world of Obama and Bush – has not returned. The United States, the international environment and the Democratic Party have changed too much for that.

Between Donald Trump and the COVID-19 pandemic, [the fractures in American institutions and society](#) have been amplified. Think back to that election night in 2008 when the losing Republican candidate, John McCain, pledged to do all in his power to help Barack Obama – “the man who ... will be my President” – lead the country through the challenges ahead.

It was another age. As Biden knows, [America’s political dysfunction and social divisions have reached a crisis point](#). The Republicans will continue to control the Senate.

The international order has also changed. [China’s economic and military power](#) has grown, while public support for the United States globally is at an all-time low. Trump’s withdrawal from institutions like the World Health Organisation has weakened an already crumbling multilateral system. Barriers and borders are being rebuilt around the world.

And the Democratic Party is different. Biden’s winning coalition ranged from youthful activists to Republican Never-Trumpers. He will find it hard to hold the different interests together, especially as the ambitions of the party's progressive wing grow.

The main point of policy continuity between Biden and Trump will not be China, but their domestic focus. Biden’s “foreign policy for the middle class” is “America First” with different goals and greater administrative skills.

Biden’s priorities will be dealing with the coronavirus, rebuilding the economy, and addressing the rifts in American society. “Economic security is national security” he has written. All the talk is of industrial policy, planning, government investment and “fair trade”.

Not even Washington subscribes to the Washington consensus any longer. American trade and economic policy is always hard-headed. It will be more so now, and that will matter for Australia in areas where Australian and American economic interests differ.

Climate change will be central to the new administration's economic and foreign policies and politically vital as well. "If we don't get this right, nothing else matters", Biden has written. Washington will rejoin the Paris agreement and pressure other countries to do more. Australia will be among them.

Biden has visited Australia. He can deliver the familiar sentiments of friendship with the best of them. No doubt, he thinks well of us. But he will by no means think only of us.

The Biden administration's foreign policy will range well beyond the Indo-Pacific. Like Trump, Biden wants to end America's "forever wars" in the Middle East, but he also wants to reinstate the Iran nuclear deal. He will encounter resistance.

Immigration and domestic politics will reinforce [the importance of Latin America](#). And when asked recently what he saw as America's greatest threat, he replied "Russia". Rebuilding relations with NATO and the EU will be high on his agenda. (It is unlikely that Biden and Harris think much about the Anglosphere.)

Biden sees diplomacy as the principal instrument of American national policy and has pledged to rebuild the State Department. To help restore America's global reputation, he will convene a Summit for Democracy in his first year in office. But it will be about fixing democracies as much as promoting them: fighting corruption domestically and advancing human rights across the board. Not all America's potential partners will welcome that.

China will continue to be a central strategic and economic competitor. The framework of the Obama-era strategic rebalancing, emphasising close ties with regional allies and outreach to India will continue.

But Biden's climate change and other multilateral ambitions, and the likelihood of more challenges from North Korea, will require [engagement with China](#). There will be more direct hard talking between Washington and Beijing. In that situation, the absence of high-level Australian contacts will become more marked.

Because of his age, Biden's cabinet and sub-cabinet appointments will be especially important. Names being floated for the big jobs (Michele Flournoy in Defence; Lael Brainard in Treasury) are impressive and many of the likely Biden appointees will be known to Australian officials.

Australians tell ourselves, a bit complacently, that we are good at bringing ideas and energy to the international table. The early months of a new administration are the

best time to inject new ideas into the American system. What proposals do we have for strengthening democracy? Rethinking multilateral institutions? Galvanising action on climate change? Managing China?

We need to be fast out of the gate with ideas to shape the new administration's policies and to reach beyond Washington as well. This world is one in which it will be harder to make our voice heard.

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