

Global Security Implications of the U.S. Election

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On November 16, 2020, the [Conflict & Security Research Cluster](#) at the Balsillie School of International Affairs hosted a closed and informal discussion, under [Chatham House Rule](#), of the short- and long-term global security implications of the U.S. election. Participants from the cluster offered unique perspectives and expertise on the complex global security issues related to outgoing U.S. President Donald Trump, who has pushed an America first agenda, and incoming president-elect Joe Biden, who vows to restore American leadership.

U.S. Domestic Security

Participants predicted a tense few months until inauguration day following the U.S. presidential election. While we have not seen widespread violence in the U.S., one respondent expressed concerns that if Trump wants violence then domestic violence will ensue, and [a tweet](#) from the President could be enough to set off some of the American public. In the event that this happens before inauguration day, Biden will not have many tools at his disposal aside from rhetoric to attempt to unify the people. One respondent added that Biden is a very seasoned politician who understands the inner workings of Washington. Whether it is a smooth transition of power or not, Biden is well-suited to step into the position of president and get to work quickly, therefore minimizing threats to national security.

The Biden victory also has important implications on the COVID-19 response in the U.S. and as Biden assumes power, the priority will be to demonstrate a clear divergence from the chaotic and often indifferent Trump approach to pandemic management. Discussants noted that such a daunting task provides a unique parallel to the early years of the Obama administration, which was forced to deal with the ongoing fallout from the 2008 Financial Crisis.

Canada-U.S. Relations

Over the past four years, the once strong Canada-U.S. relationship has been strained due to frictions and the on-going extradition case of [Meng Wanzhou](#). An overall consensus from the discussion was that relations between Canada and the U.S. will likely resume a friendlier, more diplomatic pattern. Biden will be taken more seriously in the eyes of leadership around the world and will work to normalize strained relations with key partners. More generally, participants predicted a re-professionalized U.S. foreign policy, which will strengthen Biden's effort to re-constitute U.S. leadership in global affairs.

Canada-U.S. relations have never been characterized by consensus on all issues (i.e. divergence on approaches to climate change); however, a Biden presidency is likely to be more conducive to mutually-beneficial policy-making. This view is informed by the significant shift in tone between Biden and Trump on the benefits of multilateral cooperation. Going forward, scholars argue that the fickle nature of the U.S. Congress and Senate will require much accommodation from U.S. allies, particularly if states are to depend on Biden's commitment to respecting multilateral agreements. Regardless, Canada has and will remain a key interpreter for U.S. allies in regard to U.S. foreign policy.

Asia

Biden has not been explicit about many policy areas, other than his self-proclaimed ability to work across the partisan divide to reach consensus on domestic and foreign policy. That said, many agree that the largest bipartisan issue is China. Participants observe increasing instability within the international arena that will facilitate Xi Jinping's efforts to increase China's geopolitical influence. Trump's preference for bilateral negotiation has implications for his stance on China – and other Asian players – and explains why many of the regional relationships have soured since 2016. Biden's policy stance indicates that he may engage with China directly; however, he may not limit his foreign policy strategy in the ways that Trump has. Notably, the Obama and Trump administrations maintained a military presence along the [South China Sea](#) — a strategy Biden is likely to continue. Even if China does not wish to compete with the U.S. for ideological and institutional dominance, conditions are likely to lead to a more hawkish U.S. stance towards China.

Technology security has been a point of contention in recent years. Following the U.S.-China technology war, Trump imposed a [ban on technology transfers to China](#). One respondent with expertise in technology governance noted that [banning exports to China for U.S. artificial intelligence chips](#) has had the opposite effect to what Trump intended. The ban has caused China to source inputs from other countries to expedite production of hardware for artificial intelligence development within China. Experts predict that the technology bans will be reversed by the Biden administration, in an effort to maintain U.S. dominance in the technology industry.

Participants note that, while [Trump personally met with North Korean leader](#), Kim Jong-un, Biden is unlikely to do so.

Russia

The issue of [U.S. democratic integrity](#) has overshadowed other points of divergence with respect to U.S.-Russia bilateral cooperation. U.S. rivals such as Russia appreciated Trump's preference for bilateral cooperation; however, other regional partners often felt neglected or negatively impacted by these closed-door negotiations. For example, despite U.S. sanctions on the Russian economy and oligarchs, Russian military actions in Ukraine and the Middle East have gone largely unchecked. Biden is likely to push for some form of Nuclear Arms Agreement with Russia, as well as for a renewed U.S.-led effort to establish peace in Syria. That being said, such concerns may be overshadowed by the increasingly polarizing internal conflicts within the U.S.

Iran

Trump infamously dropped out of the [Iran nuclear deal](#) and, in the process, damaged the U.S. negotiation position with respect to nuclear arms proliferators. Participants observed a consistent policy stance from Biden with respect to nuclear proliferation, and noted that other stakeholders – Iran, the P5+1 (United Nations Security Council members and Germany), and the European Union – [remain committed to the treaty](#). However, ideological or policy discontinuity is a distinct possibility among future U.S. presidents, given ongoing domestic polarization. Trump's presidency thus has implications for the approach other states may take on multilateral matters and it is unclear to what extent a Biden administration can build renewed trust among international players.

Africa

Participants questioned whether the Biden presidency will continue the Trump non-strategy on Africa – characterized by little to no discussion or collaboration with African nations. Notably, [Chinese investment](#) in Africa continues to be observed warily by Washington due to its implications for rising Chinese economic dominance.

International Organizations

In previous speeches, like the [Munich Security Conference](#) (2019), Biden voiced strong support for [NATO](#). Pro-NATO sentiments parallel the increase in military investment among alliance members that started under the Obama administration. A Biden administration is likely to continue to invest heavily in military alliances while simultaneously promoting the work and goals of NATO allies.

Investment in NATO also has implications for Biden's efforts to re-establish U.S. institutional dominance. Repairing the NATO relationship has been perceived as a necessary step in renewed multilateralism. With respect to climate change, Biden's pledge to rejoin the [Paris Agreement](#) emphasizes a prioritization of climate security and may help repair damage to the U.S. reputation in international affairs. However, Trump's inaction with regards to the pandemic response may make it difficult for the Biden administration to focus on its international strategy.

Conclusion

Workshop participants were divided on a Biden Administration's general stance towards domestic and global security. His categorical opposition to Trumpism suggests a complete change of tack, such as in the cases of North Korea and the NATO alliance. Elsewhere, however, Biden's approach may be consistent with that of Trump's, such as a continued U.S. military presence along the South China Sea.

With respect to international security, time will tell whether Biden wishes to re-engage with, or distance his administration from, international security institutions. There remains the question of whether Biden, as a long-term member of the defense establishment, can effectively [navigate a new global security landscape](#). Perhaps the largest change between the Trump and Biden administrations will be with regard to presidential tone. Biden demonstrates openness to multilateral cooperation and has [promised to be more judicious on social media](#). Notably, this creates an easier task for Canadians, as the international interpreters for allies of the U.S. With that said, [Biden's approach to the COVID-19 pandemic](#) will monopolize his time and resources until the crisis is brought under control.