

US faces both better and worse odds

Editor's Note:

With Joe Biden officially sworn in as the 46th president of the US, many are wondering what changes will be done in the world's most powerful (yet declining) country. Will the new administration clean up the mess and lift the US out of the marsh? Or will the US reunite itself to again take the leading role in the world? The Global Times invited scholars from both the US and China to share their points on these issues.

Dr Robert Lawrence Kuhn, chairman of The Kuhn Foundation and recipient of the China Reform Friendship Medal (2018)

From day one, the Biden administration is setting out on a radically different trajectory from the Trump administration in both substance and style. A much larger percentage of the American populace supports Biden over Trump; especially after the storming of the Capitol on January 6. The shift away from Trump will aid the new administration in their vision for governance and compliance. To oversimplify, the Biden Administration will be more sophisticated and inclusive domestically, and more collegial and predictable internationally.

Biden has assembled a team of highly experienced professionals, most

of whom he has worked with for years, even decades. There will be none of the dysfunctional "revolving doors" changes of key personnel. In fact, there will be more coherence in the Biden team than in any other recent presidential administration.

Though he will be pressured by the left wing of the Democratic Party, Biden will not, I predict, make radical changes in the balance of powers by "stacking" the Supreme Court with liberals or shifting the Senate leftward by giving statehood to Washington DC and Puerto Rico. Biden is a balanced centrist, some would say "boring." But this is just what America now needs.

The key indicator to predict the direction of US-China relations is found in the appointment of the key figures related to China in the State Department, National Security Council, and on matters of trade. All of them are highly experienced and balanced professionals who prize competence and pragmatism above ideology and rhetoric. This bodes well for a calming of bilateral relations, even if it is not a full reset.

The US approach to China will change from blunt-force confrontation and opposition to selective cooperation

and diplomatic engagement to communicate on differences. That said, there are indeed real issues that will need to be managed.

The Biden Administration will have the added burden of being accused, in the US political arena, of being "soft on China." I expect that, as professionals, they will rise to the occasion. This will make US-China relations more predictable and less volatile, though there will continue to be significant challenges. China can help by making subtle moves to signal desires to improve relations. We see that beginning to happen.

Shen Yi, professor at the School of International Relations and Public Affairs of Fudan University in Shanghai

The mire the US has fallen into is the division among diverse ethnic groups. Its root cause lies in the inequality of wealth. Combined with issues of race, ethics and immigration, a complicated social division has eventually been forged.

Instead of tacking wealth distribution problems, or promoting the common identity as Americans, US politicians reinforces the unique identity of each group in a bid to gain their support.

On the first day in office, Biden took a range of executive actions, the new president revoked a plan to exclude undocumented immigrants from the census count. This is used to determine each state's representation in the House of Representatives.

The theme for Biden's inauguration was "America United." But the result from signing this order will be a further political and social division in the US, which will go against the "America United" slogan.

It is obvious that the appeal of Biden and his team to solidify the country is only lip service. Their actual intent is to safeguard their own vested interests, instead of sincerely uniting this country.

Against this backdrop, rather than bridge domestic divisions, Biden is projected to amplify them.

The international community is discussing whether or not Biden will lead the US to re-embrace multilateralism and restore its global leadership. But the US at present cannot play a big role in international organizations. Its return to the WHO is mainly to offset China's influence in this organization. The international community should not set many expectations toward that.

Nord Stream 2 project remains sour point in US-Europe relations

By Sun Keqin

Antony Blinken, Joe Biden's Secretary of State nominee, said on Tuesday that the new government will use every persuasive tool to stop the construction of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline. The statement triggered debate over why Biden's administration, which voiced multiple times it would repair tattered transatlantic ties, persists in killing the energy project needed in Europe?

The US-Europe relationship was frayed during Donald Trump's presidency, and quite a few observers have pinned their hopes on Biden to fix the damage. Yet the truth is some damage can be repaired while some gaps are too wide to bridge. The Nord Stream 2 project is a typical example which mirrors huge discord between the US and Europe.

Russia is one of the US' primary rivals, which means Washington would use any approach possible to weaken Moscow. The US could not digest how Europe, which has been hesitant to pay more for NATO, is paying Russia for energy.

But the project is about the national interests of European countries. It will be a stable channel to transfer affordable energy to Europe, while the US can hardly offer alterna-

tive solutions. The gas will be transported to more EU countries from Germany. Europe thus believes it is a commercial program, which should not be connected to NATO's strategy.

Europe has another geopolitical consideration – it wants to stabilize ties with Russia through the mutually beneficial business.

Moreover, it is a project jointly constructed by Russian and European enterprises. A big sum of money has already been invested in it, which is almost complete, with relevant supporting facilities almost ready to come into service. Many interest groups are involved. Stopping the construction, or persuading Europe to abandon the pipeline, has already become mission impossible.

Biden has been suggesting he would mend ties with Europe, but he shares the same stance with the Trump administration over Nord Stream 2, and will not easily change the stance. Before he takes office, both his team and Europe have clarified their attitude over the case, which can be seen as testing each other's bottom line. Blinken's rhetoric, voiced one day before Biden's inauguration, is piling new pressure on US allies. But the latter, especially Germany, will not give in.



Illustration: Tang Tengfei/GT

Nord Stream 2 is the sour point in US-Europe ties. It will be a critical weather vane for future relations between the US and Europe.

There is currently a group of sober forces in Europe, who welcome Biden as the new US president, but understand the bilateral relationship will never go back to the good old days, because structural divergences which involve the core interests of the two are hard to resolve.

Other controversies include policies on Russia. The US will be more and more anti-Russia while Germany and France are seeking to rebuild ties with Russia. The US is treating China as a major strategic rivalry while Europe is cooperating with China.

Washington wants to maintain its hegemony while Europe pursues multilateralism and strategic autonomy. The US wants Europe to follow its lead every step of the way, yet the latter does not want to.

Europe can see changes in this era. It believes that now

is an era of great power competition. The main actors in great power competition are the US, China, Russia and Europe. Another of its perceptions is reflected in more and more opinion polls – an increasing number of Europeans believe that the US can no longer be trusted and doubt Washington's capacity to shape the world. Especially after the outbreak of the pandemic, many European countries have started to realize they can hardly rely on the US in a crisis.

The new US administration wants to repair relations. Yet Biden has just come into office and his power has not been consolidated. He can only start with the simplest issues, such as return to the Paris climate deal and the WTO, consolidate cooperation with Europe on the COVID-19 fight, stop the trade war and increase coordination in international affairs. The Trump administration has caused too much damage, which can only be repaired slowly.

But major discord between them, such as Nord Stream 2, may need to wait. If Biden is sincere enough, the best he can do now is to put the dispute aside, play down the differences and resolve the issue gradually in a low-key manner. Considering the habits of Europe and the US, as well as their alliance, it is very likely that they would close the door and reach a consensus despite the seemingly tough talks. Perhaps the Nord Stream 2 project will continue in the end, but the purchase volume may be limited.

Unlike Trump, Biden would reduce confrontation. This is already an important change. It means that while the US and Europe can return to cooperation in international affairs, and the two sides' disputes can also be alleviated.

The new administration will bring about an improvement in US-Europe relations. But a structural and fundamental improvement is impossible, so far at least.

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