

# 2021 United States Strategy and Security Priorities

Anticipating Biden's Strategy and Security Policy

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The FORCES Initiative



**FORCES**  
Strategy | Security | Social Systems

This is an Annual Strategic Priorities report  
created by the FORCES team.

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### **✓ NOTE**

The report reflects the ideas of the authors as scholars and analysts alone.

This report does not reflect an official position or statement of Purdue University. The report benefitted from the review and suggestions of a member of the Purdue Policy Research Institute.

# FOREWORD

The year 2021 comes in the US with a new presidential administration confronted by critical strategic challenges, political turmoil, and high expectations. The FORCES team of social science, STEM, and military experts summarizes in this report the leading functional, geographic, and political-military issues confronting the Biden administration. A non-partisan, land-grant university research initiative, the FORCES team report provides policymakers, military leaders, media experts, and the general public a direct and unbiased assessment of the road ahead. It identifies the most significant hot spots created by the clash between the global military, technological, and social forces. Our future [speaker series](#) and upcoming [reports](#) will provide a constant flow of knowledge. We are also looking forward to hearing your opinion about our work or to provide support in your future research and policy-making activities. Feel free to reach out to us at [forces@purdue.edu](mailto:forces@purdue.edu).

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## ABOUT FORCES

**FORCES (4S)** - *Strategy, Security and Social Systems Initiative* at Purdue University promotes research and instruction to improve decision-making in present and future global leaders. The initiative supports the use of social scientific research in strategy and security activities to shape long-range and global military, political, and organizational decision-making for a just, stable, and secure world. FORCES is housed in Purdue University's College of Liberal Arts and created in collaboration with [Discovery Park](#) and the [Institute for Global Security and Defense Innovation](#).

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A new American presidential administration coming into office is seldom an easy transition, a fact made more difficult when one party replaces another. In the areas of security and strategy Biden is walking into a dangerous room. Purdue's FORCES Initiative looks at the Biden's potential and actual strategic priorities and challenges. The domestic and world situations are morphing. On January 6, 2021, civil strife extending to the invasion of the US Capitol by President Trump's supporters administered a massive shock to the entire globe. The forces of civil conflict will not go away on Inauguration day and might even get more violent representing a serious new demand on Biden's attention and energy. Recently, opportunistic powers like PRC and Russia have exploited the paucity of US leadership, until 2016 a hallmark of the postwar world. It remains to be seen how these adversaries will react to January 6th. All the while, we no longer see a consensus on American security and foreign affairs; "politics stops at the water's edge" seems anachronistic and naive.

## ■ Personnel

Joe Biden has long and varied experience in security and strategy. He is a centrist, willing to work across the aisle, and in general opposes the use of force. Do not look for an Obama third term; as Biden said, it will be a "totally different world," but we expect him to continue Obama's "whole of government" approach. Biden embraces a broad definition of strategy, for him the pandemic, climate change, floods of refugees, and other non-military events are "threats to our security." Under him, anticipate a return to idealism and legalism, as opposed to the raw realism of Trump. Expect a renewed emphasis on human rights and multilateralism.

- **Secretary of State, Antony Blinken.** Anticipate much from Blinken, who has known Biden since the latter's senate tenure. He is an Atlanticist since his earliest days at State and has called for diplomacy based on confidence and humility.
- **Secretary of Defense, Lloyd Austin.** Austin began working closely with Vice President Biden during the 2013 150,000-troop drawdown in Iraq. He favors diplomacy and development (monetary aid) over force, which he calls "only one instrument of our national power."
- **National Security Advisor, Jake Sullivan.** The lawyer and Atlanticist served as Hillary Clinton's national security advisor. Even Congressional Republicans like him, a benefit in Biden's centrist reconstruction administration.

- **Director of National Intelligence, Avril Haines.** Haines was Deputy Director of the CIA in 2013-15. She will have an uphill battle restoring morale throughout the American intelligence community after much partisan infighting generated by the recent Russian and Chinese interference scandals.
- **Treasury Secretary, Janet Yellen.** Named by Obama to serve as Chairperson of the Federal Reserve Bank, expect her to support Biden’s moderate “whole of government” path. Internationally, she should to continue her previous open trade actions.
- **Secretary of Homeland Security, Alejandro Mayorkas.** He will carry the burden of balancing immigration policies in a way that satisfies both human rights and security interests.
- **CIA Director, William Burns.** A former diplomat, he will shift the emphasis on the workings of the agency from muscle and spycraft to intelligence and influence operations.

## ■ Geographic Areas

The “totally different world” Biden enters consists of the changing organic situation inflamed by Trump’s policies. A temporary Biden holiday back to bipartisanship, before returning to neo-populism in 2024, is in no one’s interests. He has to simultaneously solve problems at home while addressing those abroad.

- **People’s Republic of China.** Biden committed to treat the PRC as America’s primary competitor. His Democratic party now agrees with Republicans about a powerful and nouveau riche China posing a “special challenge.” The two nations’ relationship is complicated because they are each other’s top trading partner. The People’s Liberation Army is the world’s largest, and its Navy and Air Force are expanding; paid for by the country’s accumulating wealth. The PRC’s cyberwar capabilities are at least equal to America’s, and its space program is catching up. As America’s only economic and military peer rival, Biden cannot ignore the PRC, and will probably pursue a tougher policy than Obama.
- **Russia.** Biden must simultaneously keep a wary eye on Putin’s Russia. Russia is weak, and COVID has made it weaker. Continued cyber and information ops are Putin’s asymmetrical weapons of choice. The PRC pretends Russia is still a great power, and the two have enjoyed a détente. Biden will have to beware of the two coordinating their machinations, threatening to send American responses into “systems overload.”
- **Europe and NATO.** Biden is a child of the Cold War who realizes America’s Atlantic security arrangements have maintained generations of peace; so do many of his foreign policy personnel. With the expected emphasis on long-standing relationships, the EU will return to its former prominence.

- **Middle East and South Asia.** The trend away from fossil fuels plus the resurgent American oil industry has pushed the Persian Gulf into our B List of global hot spots. Biden may create a more connections in the region, for example, eschewing Trump's over-emphasis on Israel and Saudi Arabia, while remaining loyal to both. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action with Iran was a cornerstone of Obama's Gulf security regime, and we expect Biden to try to rejoin it. Biden has long favored shifting American efforts away from wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and instead focusing on non-state threats like the Islamic State.
- **Indo-Pacific.** Expect more unilateralism, but the area will come in third behind the PRC and Europe. Any interactions with North Korea will be less of photo-op variety, and more in concert with South Korea, Japan, and other regional players.
- **Latin America.** Anticipate emphasis on Central America, which Biden wants to be the hemisphere's "next great success story." A commonsense approach can restore American moral, economic leadership and help relieve our refugee problems.

## ■ Functional Areas

- **Diplomacy.** Biden favors strategies short of war: a noble objective. We believe he will restore American diplomatic eminence and unity of effort.
- **Nuclear Weapons.** Although many in the US Department of Defense believe its nuclear arsenal needs updating, both Obama and Trump considered this a waste of effort and money. Biden may reverse his predecessor and extend the START Treaty with Russia. We suggest that START should also include China, which would benefit both the US and Russia.
- **Cyber.** This newest threat area has become perhaps the most dangerous. Like 9/11, recent cyberattacks have caught America off guard and are worthy of grudging respect. A challenge is that any American countermeasures would invite counter-countermeasures; in which it is not clear how the US would fare.
- **Climate.** Biden sees climate change as an immense manmade problem requiring scientific solutions coordinated globally. He said he will return to the UN-sponsored 2016 Paris Agreement. Opportunities to include the PRC, India, or Brazil in the conversation should be examined.
- **Space.** Biden is alert to the dangers posed in the ultimate high ground. He will have his hands full with domestic and foreign challenges, and it is unclear what he will do about space.
- **Moral Leadership and Information Operations.** America's record was built on moral values, which at times clashed with realism and pragmatism. The US have usually strived to be a beacon for good. Our better values have been questioned during the past four years. Biden vocally advocated a return to American virtue, from reinforcing democracy to fighting injustice, while retaining a strong sense or realism.

## ■ US Military

In terms of capabilities and global reach, the US has no peer. But we also have worldwide commitments like no other. Biden will be under pressure to axe defense spending. Global tensions should prevent him from cutting too much, but expect him to save on “legacy systems” (ground forces, aircraft carriers) to switch to new technologies (cyber, hypersonics, space).

- **US Army:** The Army must prove its relevance in the information age. This will be an uphill battle, especially as it is of doubtful utility in the Indo-Pacific region or cyber and space arenas.
- **US Navy:** The Navy’s high op-tempo but limited manpower and ships means it is probably in the worst shape of the three services. With 90 percent of world trade and 95 percent of global internet traffic on or under the sea, the Navy has a full plate. Nearly two-thirds of its capabilities are dedicated to the Indo-Pacific region.
- **US Air Force:** The USAF is probably the healthiest service, and likely to remain DoD’s “golden child.” Its new subordinate US Space Force budget increased from \$40M in FY2020 to \$15.3B in FY2021. Overall, the future of Space Force seems secure under Biden.

## ■ Conclusions

Joe Biden faces a tough job on day one, and will have to be on guard against the unexpected. America’s adversaries are emboldened by the uncertainty and self-absorption of the past four years. It could be a time of great opportunity for Biden. The globe will be watching, both to what he says and how he says it. The bottom line for Biden, as FORCES sees it, is that again, across the full spectrum of national power, America will honor generations of traditions, be a good friend and a respectable rival which can blend human values, technology, and organizational acumen to keep the world in balance.



# INTRODUCTION

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An incoming American presidential administration coming seldom experiences an easy transition, especially if one party replaces another. For President-elect Joseph R. Biden, the 2020-2021 transition is arguably the worst, and includes the January 6 riot that violated the nation's capital shaking the foundations of the republic. When a new party comes to power, the successor often claims, "I inherited a mess from my predecessor" and particularly in areas of security and strategy, Biden enters a dangerous room.

Strong strategies rely on secure domestic foundations. The current American political scene is marked by extreme divisions, which have led to multiple episodes of political violence, starting with the assaults of federal buildings and state capitols and culminating on January 6 with the unprecedented riot at the US Capitol by Trump supporters. These developments weaken American claims to represent a champion of human rights and the rule of law, a core soft-power tool for past presidents. The Biden administration must

restore civil concord and trust in democratic processes. It needs to recognize that in this context, policies should hew to the middle. Hastily encouraging or enacting structural policies driven by partisanship can have grave consequences, although the justice system must be allowed to function. Biden needs to make the most of his presentation and perception as a centrist.

In this article, Purdue's FORCES Initiative draws on Biden's speeches and writings, his campaign, and his expected security personnel choices, looking for hints as to what his strategy and policies might be. It is the first of three articles, and concentrates on personnel. The next articles will concentrate on geographic areas of strategic interest, and on substantive-functional areas (military, diplomacy, technology, etc).

First, two important points must be explained. First, Biden is no newcomer to the areas of security and strategy. From 1997-2009 he was either chair or ranking minority member of the US Senate Foreign Relations

Committee, with a history of many written and verbal pronouncements on the subject. Then, and later as vice president (2009-2017), he traveled the globe and met many international leaders. Second, Biden must tackle the political reversals demanded by his party in response to President Donald Trump's actions and the COVID-19 pandemic; in fact, few modern American presidents have faced such crises. Trump considers it a badge of honor that domestically and internationally, he has upset countless institutions, norms, and traditions, preferring the stick to the carrot. Biden inherits the "peacemaker" halo of his previous boss, President Barack Obama. Yet, neither situation is as clear as it seems. Trump brought no less than three Muslim nations to accept the reality that Israel is here to stay, and helped Germany, South Korea, and Japan to accept that maintaining peace and security costs money. Biden and Obama still need to clear the air about their preference for drone warfare.

The domestic and world situations are rapidly changing, exacerbated by the pandemic and its fallout. Obama left a far-from-perfect situation, both in terms of divisions at home and overseas problems, such as weak responses to the rise of the People's Republic of China (PRC), Russia's Ukrainian landgrab in the Crimea and Don River Basin (Donbas), and Syrian Civil War. Trump and worsening American partisan tribalism led to four years of isolationism, withdrawal from agreements and treaties on climate, nuclear proliferation, trade, plus testy relations with neighbors and old allies. Opportunistic and revisionist powers like PRC and Russia have gladly stepped into the resulting void, and have exploited the paucity of US leadership, until 2016 a hallmark

of the postwar world. Then in 2020, COVID succeeded in making everything worse, while also confounding countermeasures by effective and incompetent nations alike. All the while, we no longer see a consensus on American strategy, security policies, and foreign affairs; the polar star of the previous two centuries, "politics stops at the water's edge" now seems anachronistic and naive.

# PERSONNEL

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President Joe Biden experienced in security and strategy and considered a centrist, is willing to work across the aisle, and generally opposes the use of force. But his views have evolved over the years. In 2003 he voted to go to war against Iraq, but as vice president advocated for the removal of 150,000 GIs from that country less than a decade later and some way with little preparation. He energetically supported the ouster of Libyan dictator Muammar Qaddafi in 2011, then urged caution after the leaderless country descended into chaos. In 2013, Biden's scheduled 45-minute one-on-one visit with PRC President Xi Jinping ran for two hours, with Xi calling his guest an "old friend of China;" during the 2020 presidential campaign, Biden called Xi "a thug" over his policies against China's Uyghur Muslim minority. Like much of today's world, Biden no longer sees the PRC as a developing, post-revolutionary newcomer, but as a former (greater than 200 years ago!) regional superpower that wants to regain its place in the world.

Biden cannot escape accountability for the Obama administration's shortcomings. Osama bin Laden's death notwithstanding, the administration failed to satisfactorily address America's wars in Afghanistan and Iraq (either prosecuting them effectively or withdrawing prematurely) or reply adequately to Russia's power grabs or interference in the 2016 general election. But we do not expect an Obama third term; as Biden has said, it will be a "totally different world" when he takes office. We can expect Biden to continue Obama's "whole of government" approach to strategy, i.e., ensuring he has more than just hammers in his foreign policy/strategy toolbox.

FORCES, and modern thinkers in general, have long seen strategy involving all aspects of national power, not just military: cultural, diplomatic, economic/financial, and social. Biden, as he told *The Atlantic* on December 8, 2020, he embraces this broad perspective. The pandemic, climate change, floods of refugees, and other non-military events are, for his team, all "threats to our

security.” Under Biden, we anticipate a return to various degrees of idealism and legalism, as opposed to realism of the Trump administration. With Biden’s administration, we can expect a renewed emphasis on human rights, reliance on alliances, multilateralism, and treaties rather than Trump’s muscle flexing and barter policies. Rather than impulse and improvisation, expect Biden to study problems and make recommendations from commissions and task forces. With all these factors in mind, his cabinet choices are moderate professionals, many with Obama pedigrees, most known to Biden for years. One of the catchwords of his administration might be “loyalty.”

### **Vice President, Kamala Harris**

Although her resume is more in the realm of domestic issues, we expect Harris offer her input on security matters and to reprise Vice President Biden’s role as first to see the president in the morning and last to see him at night. She will need to learn much and on the job on issues of importance, possibly filling in the slots allocated to her boss as Obama’s Vice-President, including negotiations with the Russians and the Chinese. Her greatest challenge is to find a loyal and informed staff that is capable to handle these issues and her many other domestic agenda duties.

### **Secretary of State, Antony Blinken**

Since the 1960s, a president’s personal staff has often eclipsed his cabinet, and accordingly the national security advisor has arguably become more important than the secretary of state. However, we can expect much from Blinken, who has known Biden since the latter’s days in the senate. He was educated at Harvard

University and Columbia University Law School, and has occupied positions as diverse as National Security Council member (1994-2001), Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for European and Canadian Affairs (1999-2001), National Security Advisor to Vice President Biden (2009-2013), Deputy National Security Advisor (2013-2015) and Deputy Secretary of State (2015-2017). Blinken is an unabashed Atlanticist since his earliest days at State, but has grown to appreciate the Pacific/Indian Oceans region as well. He favors alliances and has called for a diplomacy based on equal parts confidence and humility. For example, he promoted a more robust U.S. involvement in Syria, favored US intervention in Libya, and admits that Obama’s Syrian policy “failed.”

### **Secretary of Defense, Lloyd Austin**

Thanks to the unhealthy imbalance of recent American strategy in favor of military solutions, the defense secretary has gained influence in the cabinet. A retired US Army general, Austin will require a congressional exemption to serve in the position, as did Trump’s first SecDef. Observers on the left and right balk at this precedent-forming habit. Austin, first worked with Vice President Biden during the 2013 150,000-troop drawdown in Iraq. He favors diplomacy and development (monetary aid) over force. Biden has said he sees his SecDef “quarterbacking” the American defense establishment. In addition to military training, Austin has degrees in business and education, is a former commanding general in Afghanistan (2003-2005), and the last commander of the US troops in Iraq right before the 2011 US drawdown, which he opposed. His last and

most important position was that of the US CENTCOM (2013-2016) commander, supervising the first phase of the US response to the Islamic State takeover of Syria. Just like Blinken, he might have to show a more proactive attitude to avoid pigeon-holing as a non-interventionist.

**National Security Advisor, Jake Sullivan**

The Yale Law School graduate and Atlanticist served as Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s national security advisor. Even Congressional Republicans like him, sure to be a benefit in Biden’s centrist reconstruction administration.

**Director of National Intelligence, Avril Haines**

Physicist/lawyer Haines was Deputy Director of the CIA in 2013-15. In addition to the usual intel problems, including cyber warfare, she will have an uphill battle restoring morale throughout the entire American intelligence community. This critical player in US strategy has been caught in the crossfire of the many investigations and much partisan infighting generated by the Russian and Chinese interference scandals of the last four years.

**Treasury Secretary, Janet Yellen**

Named by Obama to serve as Chairperson of the Federal Reserve Bank, we expect her to support Biden’s moderate and multilateral “whole of government” path. Internationally, we can expect her to continue her open trade emphasis.

**Secretary of Homeland Security, Alejandro Mayorkas**

This descendant of Cuban Jews will have to walk the fine line between securing the country and honoring its traditions as an

immigrant nation. He sees the growing cyber threat, but also wants America to be a “safe country of welcome.” A lawyer by training with a background in immigration and citizenship affairs gained during the Obama administration, Mayorkas will carry the burden of balancing the immigration policies in a way that satisfies both human rights and national defense and security interests.

**CIA Director, William Burns**

A veteran of American Foreign Policy with 33 years of experience, he was Hillary Clinton’s first deputy Secretary of State. He also served as U.S. ambassador to Russia (2005-2008) and to Jordan (1998-2001). His last position was that of president of the Carnegie Endowment for International Piece. His nomination ahead of other professional CIA officers, indicates that Biden prefers political loyalty over bureaucratic command of the many and complex issues surrounding the work of the CIA. In 2016, Burns was a signatory of a letter that called on the U.S. government to reject torture absolutely and to adhere to legal bands on torture. His presence will also mark a shift from traditional spycraft and operations in cooperation with the military to a focus on non-human intelligence, cyber-warfare, and influence operations. At the same time, much remains to be defined regarding the work of CIA in these troubled times, especially if the conflict with China will increase its tempo.

# GEOGRAPHIC AREAS OF INTEREST

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The “totally different world” his administration will enter on January 20, 2021 includes the rapidly changing situation shaped by Trump’s aggressive and variable foreign policy. Under Trump, the US has unilaterally backed away from friends and allies while sending mixed signals to adversaries and challengers. As the US hegemony of the post-1989 world increasingly dissipates, Biden wants the US to act as a “convening nation” of cooperation among mutual interests. This demands long term solutions, that will outlast his administration. This can only be done by carefully choosing his fights, friends, and enemies. Over or undershooting can bring us back to square one in four years.

Will immediate domestic concerns – COVID, damage to the economy, immigration, political polarization, ethno-cultural rifts, socio-economic conflict – hamstring Biden’s security policies and relations with our global neighbors? The US must not become a one-trick pony; he has to solve problems at home

while simultaneously addressing those abroad. Here are a half dozen regions of potential opportunity or trouble:

## People’s Republic of China

Biden committed to treat the PRC as America’s primary adversary/competitor. In 2020, Biden crated a Democratic Party platform that called on the country to “stand up to China” and negotiate from the “strongest position possible.” This means that, though a bit late, the party now agrees with the Republicans about a new, powerful, and wealthy China, which poses a “special challenge.” The relationship between the two nations is further complicated because they are the number one trading partner of the other, a key contrast between now and the 20th century Cold War against the economically feeble USSR. Under the firm control of its communist dictatorship, the PRC is parlaying its commercial and industrial riches into strategic power, both civilian and military. Its Belt and Road Initiative, huge engineering projects built at very favorable terms for the PRC’s coffers,

a string of air and maritime bases throughout Asia, Africa, and the Pacific, and other toeholds in that massive region are impressive.

The PRC's military growth is no less breathtaking: its army is the world's largest and its navy and air force are constantly expanding, and paid for by the country's accumulating wealth while also benefitting from the theft of western technology. The PRC's cyberwar capabilities are probably on par with America's, and its space program is playing catch-up. Of particular concern are the PRC's aspirations in the South China Sea (See the ["FORCES Report on Competition and Conflict in Current and Future American Foreign Policy"](#)). For the past decade, it has built an archipelago of manmade island bases from which the PRC could threaten or even interdict the "Asian maritime commons," through which one-third of all global trade passes.

The incoming Biden administration promises to be tough on the PRC, essentially continuing Trump's policies. Such maneuvers would have to deal with freedom of navigation, but also human rights, intellectual property theft, Hong Kong and the Republic of China (ROC, Taiwan), 5G communication technology, and other issues. As America's only economic, and military peer rival, Biden cannot ignore the PRC and will probably pursue a tougher policy than Obama did. We have reason to believe Biden will employ negotiations to persuade the PRC to play by international rules rather than use unplanned sanctions and tariffs or dueling consulate closings. His tendency would also make formal arrangements with Australia, India, Vietnam, and even Taiwan rather than go it alone. An important challenge would be an attempt on the PRC's leadership to use the

transition period to persuade or force Taiwan to come closer to Beijing's heel. Its growing influence and power in the SCS could hinder US intervention on behalf of its ROC ally. The situation could become even more complicated if the PRC succeeds in using North Korea as a red herring: goading or bribing Kim Jong Un to restart his nuclear or ballistic missile developments.

## Russia

While the PRC must remain America's Schwerpunkt, Biden knows he has to keep a wary eye on Putin's Russia. Russia is comparatively weak, and COVID's economic repercussions have made it more vulnerable. The PRC pretends Russia is still a great power, and for the past generation the two have enjoyed a détente: the PRC gains access to advanced technology and weapons, while Russia gets its number one trading partner. Accordingly, the PRC pressures the US in the Indo-Pacific world, while Russia does the same in central and eastern Europe, and possibly the Near East. Aimed at the US, for the two Eurasian giants, Russia plays the role of balance of power junior partner. Equally important will be the increased global presence of a Russian-Chinese technological and military network that could rival NATO in scope and sophistication. Biden must beware of the two coordinating their machinations, thus sending America's ability to respond into "systems overload."

Putin likes to keep his options open, so he may be searching to reduce his country's dependence on the PRC. Biden may want to offer an escape hatch, relaxation of sanctions for example, in exchange for Russia's good behavior. The autocrat Putin seems intent on

undermining liberal democracies wherever he finds them, yet more than a century ago, even the autocratic Russia of Tsar Nicholas II found the alliance with liberal France and Britain more to its liking than the militaristic autarky offered by Wilhelm II's Germany. The politics of great powers can always offer surprises and the US should be keen on seizing the moment when it comes.

### Europe and NATO

Biden, a child of the Cold War, realizes America's security arrangements across the Atlantic have been key to generations of peace and stability. The same is true of many of his top security and foreign policy personnel choices. With the Biden administration's expected emphasis on alliances, global organizations, and long-standing relationships, we anticipate the EU will return to its former position of prominence in America's strategy.

We expect Biden to reverse many of Trump's impulsive moves, such as troop reductions in Germany. But continuing to pressure Germany to up its game in the security arena is a worthy trend. Defense spending to match its economic status and learning to not fear its own shadow on the global stage would benefit the continental order. A Russian mechanized ground attack in eastern or central Europe remains the worst-case scenario--and the least likely. Continued cyber and information ops will continue to be Putin's asymmetrical weapons of choice. Biden should take seriously the sincere worry and commitment of frontline countries like Latvia, Poland, and Romania, who have picked up the NATO burden where France and Germany have put it down. Although modest economic

partners, these and other countries possess tens of millions in population, all with a great appetite for technology and economic growth. Along the new eastern front, NATO has an advanced defense that needs strengthening and tighter integration with legacy members of the alliance.

### Middle East and South Asia

The twin trend away from fossil fuels and America's resurgent oil industry pushed the Persian Gulf region into our B List of global hot spots. Biden may create a more balanced set of connections in the area. Building on the UAE and Qatar recognition of Israel and Saudi Arabia's fear of Iran, the administration could even expect a significant rapprochement between Israel and the Saudis. We expect resistance to the latter's war with Yemen as part of an attempt to replace transactionalism with moral leadership. America should avoid over-playing Shiite-Suni-Wahabi tensions and unleashing new waves of fundamentalism. Autocratic Turkey, a NATO ally that flirts with Putin, apparently enjoys acting as a disruptive force that is collecting enemies. Turkey most recently irked Russia with its brazen intervention into the Armenian-Azeri colleague, a territory considered by Moscow its privileged domain. Turkey's leadership remains a problem that will require some creative thinking.

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action with Iran was a cornerstone of Obama's Gulf security regime, and we expect Biden to try to rejoin it. The renegotiating process can be an opportunity to undo one of the previous deal's weak points: permission given to Iran to restart uranium enrichment after 10 years of compliance. Building diplomatic fronts



against the Islamic State and Al Qaeda was a key Obama policy that Biden will probably continue. He has long favored shifting American efforts away from the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, focusing instead on these two non-state threats. At most we see a specialized counterinsurgency force remaining in Afghanistan; again, Biden's preferred solution.

### **Indo-Pacific apart from PRC**

Expect more unilateralism with friends here, but the area will come in a distant third behind the emphasis on the PRC and Europe. Any interactions with North Korea will be less a photo-op and more in concert with South Korea, Japan, and other regional players. PRC should be made to understand that using its influence over North Korea strategically, as an indirect threat, could be treated in kind by US support for Vietnam, India, or Mongolia in their own quarrels with China.

### **Latin America**

We anticipate more attention to Central America, which the Biden campaign wants to make into the hemisphere's "next great success story." A commonsense approach here can simultaneously restore our moral economic leadership and help relieve our refugee problems. This means American support for Central American countries via strong cooperation in the business, technological, and law enforcement areas, barring the activities of international drug cartels and human trafficking, and focusing on the human rights. However, we see little harm in continuing Trump's policy of pressuring dictatorships, such as those in Cuba and Venezuela.

By choice and postwar tradition, the US has taken on worldwide obligations. For the foreseeable future, no other country has America's reach. Trump's disconcerting policies and the domestic turbulence notwithstanding, the nation still has considerable prestige abroad. We see Biden reengaging the world.

# FUNCTIONAL AND DOMAIN SPECIFIC AREAS OF STRATEGIC INTEREST

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**B**iden's possible strategies will also cover a half dozen functional areas, fields that span the entire globe. Some are age-old, such as moral leadership and diplomacy, others are brand new and developing such as climate, cyber, and space.

## Military Strategies

In terms of capabilities, spending, and global reach, the US has no military peer. But we also have global commitments like no other nation, largely a self-imposed choice. Due to pandemic and economic problems, however, Biden will be under pressure to cut defense spending. Coercion will come from two directions: progressive Democrats and conservative Republicans. Global tensions should prevent Biden from cutting too much, so he will have to look for inefficiencies or excessive amounts going into defense contractor profits or shareholder stocks; for many, the bloated DoD budget is synonymous with runaway military-

industrial complex spending. He has already said he will look for savings in "legacy systems" (ground forces, aircraft carriers) to switch to new technologies (cyber, hypersonics, space).

### US Army

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As it had to do at the dawn of the atomic age 70 years ago, the Army must prove its relevance in the information age today. This will be an uphill battle, especially as it is of doubtful utility in the Indo-Pacific region or cyber and space arenas. Look for Biden to cut Army funds in favor of larger Navy and Air Force budgets. Army's saving development of rapid, flexible, and lethal drone or autonomous armored forces. Still, the administration should lead the charge by creating the funding pipelines and future goals needed to support the Army.

### US Navy

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The Navy's high op-tempo but limited number of men and ships means it is probably in the worst shape of the three services. With

90 percent of world trade and 95 percent of global internet traffic on or under the sea, the Navy has a full plate. Nearly two-thirds of its capabilities are dedicated to the Indo-Pacific region, where it faces almost 100 percent of the PRC's regional, but growing, navy. The remaining fraction of the US Navy's capacity covers the rest of its global mission. A fleet of 400 ships (as opposed to the current 300) should be a desirable goal, with a completion due date of the middle of the decade. The Navy is the bulwark of the Pacific; given the current emerging conflict (disguised today as [competition](#)), the first and most important step should be buttressing the Navy and the Marine Corps.

### US Air Force

The USAF is probably the healthiest service, and likely to remain DoD's "golden child" for the indefinite future. Its subordinate US Space Force, formed in December 2019, has gone from butt of late-night TV jokes to full-fledged member of DoD. After an uncertain start under Trump, its budget increased from \$40M in FY2020 to \$15.3B in FY2021. In his December 2020 Planning Guidance, USSF commander named the PRC and Russia as his two immediate threats. The mission of both services, including USTRATCOM, is to find the most comprehensive and forward-looking strategy to maintain control and intercontinental force projection. For this, hypersonic and missile defense combined with drone and AI sensing and command networks need to be developed and maintained at the highest level of preparedness. Overall, the future of US Space Force seems secure under Biden.

## Non-military strategies

### Diplomacy

Biden favors strategies short of war: a noble objective. For the past four years, the Department of State, its diplomats, and experts, have been underutilized or overridden. The decades-long trend toward personal White House staff over cabinets noted above notwithstanding, we believe Biden and Blinken will strive to restore some measure American diplomatic eminence and unity of effort around the globe.

### Nuclear Weapons and non-proliferation

Although many in the US Department of Defense believe its nuclear arsenal needs serious updating, both Obama and Trump dragged their feet, considering the move a waste of effort and money. Biden will likely do the same. He may reverse his predecessor and extend the START Treaty with Russia, rather than cancel it. However, since a costly and dangerous nuclear arms race with the PRC may be in the offing, it would be smart for Biden to convince Russia that it is in mankind's interests that China should be included in the agreement.

### Cyber

This newest threat area has become perhaps the most dangerous in the short term. Similar to the terrorist assault of 9/11, recent cyberattacks on all manner of targets have caught America "looking the other way," have been largely effective, are just the beginning of a real asymmetrical struggle, and are worthy of our grudging respect. The US, a liberal and open society, is especially vulnerable to

such technological attacks. This trend will grow as artificial intelligence becomes more sophisticated. American personal and sensitive information, elections, infrastructure all require protection. A challenge for Biden will be some of the medium's inherent features, principally that cyberattacks do not qualify as acts of war... yet. Further, any American countermeasures would invite counter-countermeasures; it is not clear at the moment if the US would come out on top in any such exchange.

In 2018 the Trump administration stood up the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency ([CISA](#)) to coordinate federal, state, local, private cooperation. As with many potentially useful Trump initiatives, however, it lacked a clear strategy. The Biden team has promised to give the CISA a new direction and purpose, which can only be seen as good for American security overall. One of them could be a focus on deterrence and assurance, like the nuclear policies of the 1960s and '70s. It is not enough to be prepared for the next cyber-attack. The US should be able to defang future attacks, to counter them, and to assure our allies that we are always ready to answer in kind to any intrusions.

## Climate

Biden sees climate change as an immense manmade problem that requires even greater scientific solutions coordinated globally, and vows he will return the US to the UN-sponsored 2016 Paris Agreement. Halting and then reversing global warming has tremendous security implications. Rising sea levels threaten coastal cities and naval bases. Increasing temperatures may create new-and greater refugee crises, dangerous food shortages, and

mass extinctions. Yet, again, opportunities for including PRC, India, or Brazil in the conversation at a deeper level of commitment could also be a part of the deal. While the US and its allies have slightly diminished their CO<sub>2</sub> emissions since 2000, China and India have increased them by 400%. Discussions about future credit for past CO<sub>2</sub> emissions are not useful, if the goal is to make a breakthrough commitment to global climate change today. What would be useful is a new commitment to developing global consortia or green energy investment funds. These consortia might include PRC, the Gulf States, India, Russia, or Brazil and create new methods of non-fossil fuel-based energy production (including fusion and cleaner nuclear power). This may include forward- looking technologies such as pebble bed nuclear generators, which may eliminate the danger of catastrophic nuclear plant explosions. This US technology, and others, could cement a new era of international collaboration.

## Space

Biden is alert to the dangers posed in the ultimate high ground. Cold War era attempts to preclude the weaponization of space have largely been bypassed in the 21st century. In 2007 the PRC proved capable of destroying one of its obsolete weather satellites. Meanwhile, America's space program has floundered. President George W. Bush's promise to return to the moon in 2020 went nowhere, and Trump's claim to return by 2024 may not survive. Biden will have his hands full with domestic and foreign strategy challenges, and it is unclear what he will do about space. Private organizations like SpaceX seem poised to take

the lead in space, and the Biden administration might motivate the nation to maintain its lead in high orbit space exploration.

### **Moral Leadership and Information Operations.**

America's historical record at home and abroad has fluctuated over the decades, but the nation has always strived to be a beacon for good. Since 2001, with the start of the war on terror and amplified since 2016, with the emergence of populisms and political infighting, our better values have been questioned both at home and abroad. Biden has been vocal in advocating a return to American virtue, from reinforcing democracy and fighting injustice to working to outlaw torture.

This must be matched by a reinvigorated commitment to marketing America's leadership in international human rights law enforcement and equitable treatment of ethnic, religious, or political minorities. In the past generation, we have fallen behind by disbanding the US Information Agency, weakening the Voice of America, and failing to use the latest technologies to provide access to information to all concerned. Furthermore, the US government took a neutral stance in the negotiations that led major US corporations (Yahoo!, Google, or Facebook) to self-censor and politically adapt their services to the demands of China and Russia. The Biden administration should condition any trade negotiations with PRC with provisions that guarantee the free and equal flow of digital media across the Pacific.

Similarly, Russian media such as RT, both on the US cable networks and US-based social media (such as YouTube), should be governed by the same principle of reciprocity. The Biden administration should revive efforts

by the State Department and US Agency for Global Media to reach out globally, including satellite-born internet services, such as the ones promoted by Facebook or Space-X. For this, both organizations should actively recruit and promote visionary leaders, abstaining from politicizing the organizations. After the Obama administration had replaced the Broadcasting Board with a federal agency, Donald Trump used the new position to tilt the US Global Media in a direction aligned with his priorities. Major organizational reforms are needed to restore the organization as a voice of American soft diplomacy, dedicated to promoting universal access to information and protecting freedom of speech.

# CONCLUSION

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As incoming president, Joe Biden faces a tough job on day one, at home and abroad. His administration will have to be on guard against the unexpected; recall that 9/11 occurred less than nine months into Bush's presidency. Strategically, America's adversaries are emboldened by the atmosphere of uncertainty and self-absorption that has characterized US politics over the past four years. Challenges include American weakness to respond to Russian and Chinese election meddling, social media weaponization, disinformation and propaganda, intellectual property and data theft, and placing bounties on US military personnel, to name a few. The troubling events of January 6 add a new and dangerous kind of civil strife not seen in generations to Biden's list of woes. By the same token, the Biden presidency could be a time of great opportunity for him to make a mark on the world instead of acting as a mere transitional placeholder. The globe will be watching, both to what he says and how he says it. The bottom line of Biden's strategy and security policies, as FORCES sees them, is that once again, across the full spectrum of national power, America will be true to generations of its traditions and values, a good ally and friend, and a respectable rival who knows and can blend human values, high-technology, and organizational acumen to keep the world in balance.