

Biden's foreign policy: A prognosis

From Asean to Pyongyang, what is likely to be in store with the changes to come from the 46th President of the United States

Tommy Koh

For the Straits Times

I have known President-elect Joe Biden since 1984. During the period from 1984 to 1990, I served as Singapore's Ambassador to the United States. I called often on Senator Biden, who was a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. I found him to be knowledgeable and friendly. It helped that he had enormous respect for Singapore's founding prime minister, Mr Lee Kuan Yew.

Then President Barack Obama respected Mr Biden's knowledge of foreign affairs. He delegated to his vice-president responsibility for Iraq, Ukraine and Latin America. With his experience and vast network of influential friends, Mr Biden is well prepared for the presidency and the challenges of America's foreign relations.

AMERICA FIRST

With Mr Biden in the White House, we will be closing the chapter on President Donald Trump's signature "America First" foreign policy. The policy expresses itself in many ways but let me cite one example: During the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic, there was a global shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE). President Trump issued an order to all American companies manufacturing PPEs outside America to ignore their contractual obligations and send their production back to the US.

I don't think a President Biden would have issued such an order. He knows that America cannot be the leader of the world if it thinks only of itself.

STRENGTHENING THE ALLIANCE SYSTEM

One of the strengths of America's foreign policy is its alliance

system. The best-known example is the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Nato).

Mr Biden knows that Nato serves America's national security interests and can be expected to strengthen it rather than undermine it by, for example, withdrawing troops from Germany.

Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand are also treaty allies of the US. As with Nato, a better appreciation of these allies can be expected from the Biden administration. What we will see is a strengthening of these alliances, taking into account the big picture of America's national security interests instead of focusing on and fighting over how much the Japanese and South Korean governments should pay US taxpayers for stationing US troops in their countries.

END TRUMP'S WAR ON MULTILATERALISM

President Trump believes strongly in US sovereignty. He believes that multilateralism and multilateral institutions weaken American sovereignty.

Unlike Mr Trump, Mr Biden believes that America cannot operate alone in this interdependent and inter-connected world. He believes that the US has to work with its allies, partners and friends, and that the post-World War II international order and its institutions serve American interests. He will, therefore, put an end to Mr Trump's campaign against globalism and multilateralism.

Mr Biden has already announced that the US will rejoin the World Health Organisation, the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action on Iran's nuclear programme signed between Teheran and the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council together with Germany.

Whether Mr Biden will be able to carry out the full extent of his



President-elect Joe Biden's vision is of an America with the world and leading the world. He will uphold international law and the rule of law, and will support a rules-based international order, says the writer. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

campaign promises is likely to hinge on who will control the US Senate and that question will depend on the outcome of two elections, which will be held in January next year, to fill the two Senate seats for the state of Georgia.

While that lies ahead, there are things Mr Biden can do that may seem small-scale on first sight but have a bigger positive impact. For instance, I hope he will stop blocking the appointment of appellate judges of the World Trade Organisation (WTO), an indispensable international organisation. The much-admired dispute settlement system of the WTO has been paralysed by Mr Trump's refusal to approve the appointment of such judges.

WILL THE U.S. JOIN THE CPTPP?

One of the most important achievements of the Obama administration was the

conclusion, after five years of negotiation, of the free trade agreement called the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). The agreement had 12 partners on both sides of the Pacific Ocean. On his first day in office, President Trump withdrew from the TPP.

The remaining 11 partners of the TPP, led by Japan, decided to keep it going. After further negotiations, to reflect the withdrawal of the US, the TPP was reincarnated as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). It came into force in 2018 among the first six countries to ratify the agreement – Australia, Canada, Japan, Mexico, New Zealand and Singapore. It has since grown, with Vietnam, Malaysia and Chile among its new members.

The question is whether under Mr Biden, the US will join the CPTPP. Ideally, the US should join.

However, I don't think it will, for the time being. Why? Because US politicians have demonised free trade and the TPP. Even if Mr Biden is prepared to pay the political cost of joining the CPTPP, it may be blocked by the US Congress.

ASEAN-U.S. TIES

The Obama-Biden administration elevated the importance of Asean in US foreign policy.

I hope that Mr Biden will continue Mr Obama's legacy. Unlike Mr Trump, who has skipped three Asean summits in a row, I am more hopeful of Mr Biden showing up for the annual Asean summit and related summits. If he is unable to attend, I expect him to send his Vice-President, Ms Kamala Harris, to represent him.

NORTH KOREA

I don't think Mr Biden and

Chairman Kim Jong Un will be writing "love letters" to each other in the way President Trump and the North Korean leader did in their unlikely "bromance".

I don't expect Mr Biden to agree to meet Mr Kim unless Pyongyang shows concrete evidence, and not just words, of its commitment to the complete and irreversible denuclearisation of North Korea.

RUSSIA

I expect Mr Biden will be tougher on Russia than Mr Trump. He will hold Russia accountable for its actions in Georgia and the Ukraine. However, I expect the US and Russia to cooperate where their interests converge.

CHINA

I expect Mr Biden to stop the so-called new Cold War which Mr Trump has launched against China.

However, I do not expect the US-China relationship to go back to the state it was in during the Obama administration. US public opinion and elite opinion in both the Democratic and Republican parties have become anti-China. Even the US business community, which used to support China, has become critical.

The new consensus in the US is that China is a strategic competitor. In view of this, I expect Mr Trump's Cold War to be replaced by a Cold Peace. A cold war is a contest between two adversaries. The competition is waged on many fronts, including trade, technology, military, ideology, culture and diplomacy. In contrast, a cold peace is a situation in which the two countries do not regard each other as adversaries. They are at peace with each other but there is no warmth in the relationship.

THE BIDEN VISION

Mr Biden is not an isolationist or unilateralist. He is a multilateralist.

His vision is not of an America against the world or America alone in the world. His vision is of an America with the world and leading the world. He will uphold international law and the rule of law, and will support a rules-based international order.

In keeping with the values he espouses, one can expect a Biden administration to restore Asean's importance to US policy. In Asia, even as we can expect a Cold Peace with China, it is likely that Mr Biden will maintain America's extremely close relationship with India.

He will pay more attention to Latin America and will treat Africa with respect and not derision. He will not be anti-Islam.

Mr Biden is a team player and not a solo player. He is likely to appoint experienced experts, both within and outside the Democratic Party, to key positions in his administration.

Given what we know of Mr Biden's character and the early statements from his transition team, the world can, hopefully, look forward to four years of stability, rationality and principled leadership.

stopinion@sph.com.sg

• Tommy Koh is the rector of Tembusu College at the National University of Singapore.