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

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For the Straits Times

I have known President-elect Joe Biden since 1964. During the period from 1988 to 1993, 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 him the responsibility of being the US envoy for the Middle East, to the Palestinian leaders and to the peace talks. Senator Biden was a partner in the presidency and the challenge of America’s foreign relations.

STRENGTHENING THE ALLIANCE SYSTEM

One of the strengths of America’s foreign policy is this alliance system. The best-known example is the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (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, and other treaty allies of the US. As with Nato, a better appreciation of these allies can be expected from the Biden administration. What we lose is the strength of these alliances, taking into account the advent of China as a power in the Asia-Pacific region, though this can be mitigated by the right political mix and the willingness of others to cooperate.

END TRUMP’S WAR ON MIGRANTS

President Trump believes strongly in US sovereignty. He believes that multilateralism is a threat to American sovereignty. Unlike Mr Trump, Mr Biden believes that America cannot operate alone either in the world or in the inter-connected world. He believes that the US needs to work with its allies, partners, and friends, and that the post-War World II international order and institutions serve American interests. He will, therefore, put an end to Mr Trump’s campaign against multilateralism.

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

Whether Mr Biden will be able to carry out the threat of a build-up of nuclear weapons, as the so-called new Cold War which Mr Trump has launched against China.

Chairman Kim Jong-un will be writing “love letters” to each other in the way President Trump and the North Korean leader feared that their unlikely “honeymoon” will last. I expect Mr Trump to try to meet Mr Kim unless Pyongyang shows more enthusiasm and not just words, of its commitment to the complete, verifiable and irreversible destruction of North Korea.

RUSSIA

I expect Mr Biden to be tougher on Russia than Mr Trump. He will be harder. “Russia does not have a national interest or “unends” to it. We have no more than 140,000 US troops in Russia.

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 US opinion in both the Democratic and Republican parties have become more China-friendly. From the US business community, which used to support China, has become critical.

The new consensus in the US is that China’s strategic and economic power is competitive. US policy on China has to be replaced by a Cold Peace. A cold war is not in US strategic interests, nor in China’s. The Chinese economy is growing too fast for the US to replace it.

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.

THAILAND

Mr Biden is not an isolationist or xenophobe, but he is a realist. His vision is not of an America against the world but of an America in the world. His vision is of an America that has the capacity to lead the world. He will uphold international law and the rule of law, and will support a rules-based international system.

In looking at the values he espouses, one can expect a Biden administration that will be more predictable. There will be no surprises, even as we await a Cold Peace with China, it will be a Biden administration that will not be too fast in engaging with India. Mr Biden will pay more attention to his relations with Australia and New Zealand and will not return to the “back to Asia” (trump)will be the US Congress.

ASEAN-U.S. TIES

The Obama 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. He is not as busy as Mr Trump, he will have more time to deal with Asia, and he will not have the same kind of disagreement with India.