

President Biden's First 100 Days

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The focus on an American president's first 100 days dates back to 1933 when Franklin Delano Roosevelt, responding to the challenges posed by the Great Depression, signed 15 major pieces of legislation and 76 laws in exactly that timeframe. It has, for better or worse, since then become a standard of analysis applied to the beginning of every president's term. By most measures, President Joe Biden has been relatively successful in his first 100 days.

Another informal term used to discuss the opening of a presidency is the question of whether the new president is granted a "honeymoon" by opposing political forces. Biden's accomplishments have come despite the fact that former president Donald Trump and the opposition Republican Party have made his task more, not less, difficult. The obstacles thrown in front of Biden's first 100 days include Trump's refusal to accept his defeat as legitimate, many Republicans supporting what became known as the "big lie" that Biden did not win, the mob attack mounted on the Capitol with Trump's urging and support, and solid Republican opposition to Biden's initial legislative program, including emergency relief for the Covid-19 crisis.

Most important success

President Biden's most important success at the beginning of his term in office was bringing much-needed stability and calmness to the White House in the wake of Trump's turbulence. He also established

a direct link between America's domestic health and its international role when he argued during the campaign that revitalizing American democracy, society and economy were key to the renewal of credible US international leadership. Moreover, he expanded the concept of national security to include fighting the pandemic and dealing with the climate change crisis.

Immediate focus on Covid-19

Biden's most immediate focus was on organizing the government's response to the Covid-19 crisis, perhaps similar to Roosevelt's focus on the depression. After initially aiming to provide 100 million vaccinations in the first 100 days, Biden in fact doubled this goal with a projection of more than 200 million by April 30. When his plan for financing the enhanced inoculation process and economic recovery ran into uncompromising Republican opposition, Democratic leadership in the Senate and House used what is called the "reconciliation" process to pass by the slimmest margins the \$1.9 trillion legislation without any Republican support in the House and Senate. This would not have been possible had the Democrats not won both Senate runoff elections in Georgia, producing a 50-50 standoff in that chamber, where a tie vote can be broken by the Vice President, Kamala Harris.

Meanwhile, Biden used executive orders to reverse many decisions of Trump, including government regulations affecting discrimination, the environment and immigration. He returned the United States to the Paris [Climate] Agreement and the World Health Organization (WHO) while reversing Trump's Muslim travel ban. He reopened the US negotiations with Iran on its future nuclear program and put US foreign policy on a foundation of cooperation with allies and like-minded states.

Biden brought to an end the 'love affairs' his predecessor had nurtured with authoritarian leaders like Chinese President Xi Jinping, Russian President Vladimir Putin, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin

Salman, and North Korean President Kim Jong-un, thereby signaling that the new US approach would be principled foreign policy founded in American interests and strengths, supporting democracy and the rule of law.

Infrastructure challenge

One important Biden campaign commitment was to deal with the weakened state of American infrastructure. The White House has described it as essential, in part to support the US ability to compete more effectively internationally.

There is a broad consensus in the United States that supports an infrastructure initiative. The problem is that Republicans and Democrats are working with different definitions of "infrastructure." The president's \$2.3 trillion proposal addresses issues ranging from roads and bridges to broadband access, research and development, climate change, racial equality and investment in manufacturing. The Republican definition is much narrower, including mostly roads and bridges, and perhaps broadband, but otherwise referring to the proposal, as did Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, as a "Trojan horse."

The controversy also extends to how the program should be financed. The president has proposed to pay for the plan by raising corporate income tax from 21 to 28 percent and eliminating loopholes, as opposed to higher gas taxes and tolls (which would have affected the middle class much more). Part of Biden's agenda is to reverse elements of the Trump tax cut that mainly benefited corporations and the wealthiest taxpayers. But these tax reversals make bipartisan support unlikely. Biden also faces pressure from the progressive wing of his party, many of whom say that the plan has done too little over eight years. Some environmentalists say that the plan doesn't do enough to combat climate change. One of Washington's most respected former officials, Leon Panetta, says that Biden should go big on infrastructure:

"He should go out of his way to make it bipartisan; if the Republicans give him a hard time, tell them to go to hell. But make the effort."

Biden met with a bipartisan group of lawmakers on April 12. White House press secretary Jen Psaki says that Biden is willing to negotiate: "His objective is to find a way forward where we can modernize our nation's infrastructure so we can compete with China." In theory, Biden could use the same reconciliation procedure employed for the Covid-19 relief package and get infrastructure through the Senate without a single Republican vote. But some Democrats may not allow this to happen unless a serious attempt is made to bring some Republicans on board.

Migration

Migration is an area in which the Biden administration has had the most trouble so far. Changes in the very restrictive system put in place by the Trump administration resulted in a flood of thousands of "unaccompanied children" into the US, which has overwhelmed the system and facilities. Ending the practice of separating families, protecting undocumented members of armed services, and ending the travel ban against people from Muslim-majority countries are all features of Biden's reforms. But sorting out migration issues will take much longer than the first 100 days of his presidency.

Personnel politics

A critically important part of any new administration's first days is the strategy for placing qualified individuals in cabinet and other critical administration positions. Candidate Biden promised during the campaign to produce a diverse and well-qualified cabinet. He has apparently succeeded; as roughly half of the cabinet-appointed are women and around half are non-white. Some of Biden's appointees are drawn from the Obama administration years, including Secretary of State Antony Blinken and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin is the first African American to serve in that

position. Well-respected career diplomat William Burns is CIA Director, and Alejandro Mayorkas is the first immigrant to take charge of the Department of Homeland Security. Former Secretary of State John Kerry has been appointed as Biden's envoy for the environment, reflecting the priority Biden places on international cooperation on climate change issues. No reasonable observer would argue that Biden's appointees lack competence. That conclusion was reaffirmed when it was announced that Dr. Karen Donfried, most recently head of the German Marshall Fund and a former Obama NSC staffer and Congressional Research Service analyst, had been nominated as the Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs.

Foreign policy

President Biden's leading foreign policy goal has been to return the United States to good physical and economic well-being, domestic democracy, and international responsibility and respectability. The initial agenda is indeed dominated by internal priorities. But those efforts are set in the context of a foreign policy approach that is multilateral and built on a foundation of cooperation with like-minded allies. This approach puts rebuilding constructive relations with NATO allies at the top of the foreign policy priorities.

Candidate Biden pledged that America would lead by example. An important part of his approach would be to restore the integrity of democracy and the US moral commitment to liberal values at home and enable the world to see the United States once again as the leader of the free world based on its actions. This includes reforming the criminal justice system and education, defending election integrity, and instituting stronger anti-corruption regulations for politicians among other initiatives.

Europe

A major part of Biden's restoration of American international leadership rests on improving relations with the European NATO allies and EU members. Steps in

this direction were taken by rejoining the Paris climate agreement, offering to return to the Iran nuclear deal, and removing punitive tariffs on European goods. The administration hopes that America's more positive approach to transatlantic relations will be reciprocated by the Europeans in trade policy, increased defense efforts, and common approaches to dealing with challenges posed by Russia and China.

On a personal note, my appreciation of President Biden's approach to Europe is based on my experience as the leading Congressional Research Service expert on NATO. Almost forty years ago, I wrote a study for Congress titled: "Crisis in the Atlantic Alliance: Origins and Implications". When the study was published by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, the requestor wrote:

"In the conviction that a healthy alliance relationship remains vital to U.S. interests, I called upon the Congressional Research Service to analyze the sources of differing United States and European approaches to the East-West relations and the implications for NATO's future. ... In the hope that this report will contribute to the current debate concerning the American commitment to NATO I respectfully submit it for publication. Signed, Joseph R Biden, Jr. Ranking Member Subcommittee on European Affairs."

To illustrate how persistent some of the issues around transatlantic relations are, let me quote a brief section from my 1982 conclusions:

"How serious is the current crisis? A number of analysts argue that NATO has outlived its usefulness; some contend that its strategy is outdated and irrelevant. But others argue that we're talking ourselves into a bigger crisis than is justified by events; NATO for those analysts still represents the best framework possible for preserving East-West peace and internal West European stability."

Russia

Biden's relationship with Russia got off to what could be called a rough start. In response to a question from an interview-

wer, Biden agreed that Russian president Putin could be described as a “killer.” There certainly is truth to Biden’s response that was nonetheless considered “undiplomatic” by some observers. Biden undoubtedly wanted to make a point, and the point was followed by a package of sanctions in response to Russian interference in American elections. Putin’s welcome to the new administration largely took the form of an aggressive posture around Ukraine, building up forces on Ukraine’s borders that could have been the prelude to an assault. Many observers judged this to be intended to pressure Ukraine for concessions, weaken European support for the former Soviet republic, and test the new American administration.

China

All signs from the early months of the Biden administration suggest that there will likely be continuity but also change in the US policy toward China. There will be no love fest between Biden and Xi Jinping. The bipartisan consensus in Washington is that China is the number one threat to the United States and the West. The competition has ideological, power and commercial/economic aspects. Neither country wants war, but there are circumstances that could lead to a cold, or even hot, war.

There will be dialogue, which has already begun. Biden has spent hours talking with Xi Jinping in the past, but he neither admires nor wants to emulate him. Biden has already expressed his displeasure to Xi regarding treatment of the Muslim Uighur population and reports of work camps. The Biden administration policy toward China could look something like the NATO Harmel Formula for the Soviet Union during the Cold War, which today still applies in different circumstances to Russia. This means Biden will firmly defend American political, strategic, economic, and financial interests while maintaining dialogue and developing cooperation when it is in the national interest of the United States to do so. I expect a common NATO policy toward China would have to be modeled in a similar way.

Indo-Pacific

Just as restoring positive ties with Europe is at the heart of Biden’s foreign policy, solidifying the US relationship with Japan is key to his approach to the Pacific. The United States needs to cultivate a relationship with Tokyo just as productive as with Berlin, Paris, Brussels and London. And, Biden’s first 100 days has included a White House visit from Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga. The Biden administration will also seek to establish strong working relationships and international cooperation with India as one of the additional keys to dealing with Chinese power and influence.

Middle East (Iran, Israel/Saudi Arabia)

It is said that relations with Israel are the “third rail” of American politics, meaning that domestic politics require strong support for Tel Aviv. That reality will continue under President Biden, but the warm relationship between Biden’s predecessor and Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu will not carry on. Likewise, the first 100 days have suggested that the strategic connection with Saudi Arabia will be maintained, but the Saudis will have much less influence on US policy in the region. Decreasing reliance on Saudi Arabia includes the administration’s commitment to keep Iran as a non-nuclear weapon state through renewing the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) that was abandoned by the Trump administration.

Afghanistan

Finally, President Biden has decided to withdraw all US forces from Afghanistan to bring this war to an end. The Trump administration had made a similar decision and said that all US forces would be out by May 1, 2021. It appears that the Trump plan was not sufficiently developed or coordinated with NATO countries, which still maintains substantial numbers of forces in Afghanistan. Under the Biden plan, all US and NATO forces will be withdrawn by September 11, 2021 – the 20th anniversary of the al Qaeda attacks on the United States that led to the original US war against al Qaeda and the

host Taliban government in Afghanistan. The decision was controversial in the United States and could risk a Taliban return to power and new bases for al Qaeda or ISIS terrorists. From a humanitarian point of view, the departure may expose supporters of the US presence to retaliation by the Taliban. It could also be disastrous for Afghan civil society, destroying the progress that has been made in the past 20 years in establishing rights for women and education for girls, which the previous Taliban regime had prevented. But most Americans likely believe it is time to bring the war to an end.

Final observation

When Bill Clinton ran for president in the 1990s, the slogan that helped him defeat George H. W. Bush was “it’s the economy, stupid.” When asked what a comparable saying might be for the Biden administration after its first 100 days, I suggested “it’s democracy, stupid.” Both in domestic policy choices and international commitments, President Biden seems intent on basing his presidency on restoring a healthy American democracy as the key to leadership of the West, particularly as it faces competing models of internal political and international systems being advocated by China and Russia.

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