



BRIEFING PAPER

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Biden and the UK

By Ben Smith

Summary

Despite the controversy the next President of the United States will be Joe Biden of the Democratic Party. How will that affect the UK?

On many issues, such as climate change, Iran, free trade and multilateralism, Joe Biden offers policies that are closer to the UK's than those of his predecessor, Donald Trump. The Paris Climate Conference, to be [held in Glasgow in 2021](#), could be an opportunity for the UK to build on those shared interests. Biden also promises to work to restore traditional US alliances, which should include the UK.

It is over the Government's Brexit policies that relations could be strained, however. The UK has dropped [proposed legislation](#) that the Biden team thought threatened peace in Northern Ireland – that may help the UK get a vital post-Brexit trade deal with the US. But Biden supports the EU and may prioritise countries that are influential in the EU – France and Germany. There has also been [a perception](#) among staff in the incoming Administration that the present UK Government's general outlook is close to that of Donald Trump.

1. A change?

Sir Peter Westmacott, former UK Ambassador in Washington DC, said of November's US poll: "There probably hasn't been a US presidential election of such significance for the future of the country, its values and its alliances as this year's contest since, well, the last one."

Despite a solid advantage for Democratic candidate Joe Biden in the election count, President Trump had still not conceded at the time of writing. With [50 states and the District of Columbia having certified their election results](#), President Trump's only avenues for a second term are either the courts over-turning the election results, or federal legislators objecting to them. President Trump has had [little success in the courts](#), and

legislators have not indicated they are willing to take such action, [and it is not clear that their objections](#) would have a material impact on the outcome.

On 15 December, the Electoral College [confirmed Biden's victory](#). It is almost certain, therefore, that Joe Biden will become the 46th President on 20 January 2020.

What would a Biden presidency mean for UK interests and foreign policy? Joe Biden wrote an [article for Foreign Affairs March/April 2020](#) setting out his foreign policy programme should he win the election.¹ The article forms the basis for this note and, unless otherwise stated, quotations are from that article.

2. Democracy promotion

Biden promises to “restore” US democracy at home, as an essential element of US leadership abroad. Once elected, Biden says he would “... invite my fellow democratic leaders around the world to put strengthening democracy back on the global agenda.”

“During my first year in office, the United States will organize and host a global Summit for Democracy to renew the spirit and shared purpose of the nations of the free world.”

The new drive would include “[...] commitments in three areas: fighting corruption, defending against authoritarianism, and advancing human rights in their own nations and abroad.”

Those objectives chime with UK policies. In the [2015 National Security Strategy](#) the UK pledges: “to promote the golden thread of conditions that drive prosperity all across the world: the rule of law, good governance and the growth of democracy”. A new security strategy will be published when the Government’s [Integrated Review of security, defence and foreign policy](#) concludes early in 2021.

2.1 Tax havens

Biden’s commitment to a stronger anti-corruption drive included a pledge to fight for financial transparency:

I will lead efforts internationally to bring transparency to the global financial system, go after illicit tax havens, seize stolen assets, and make it more difficult for leaders who steal from their people to hide behind anonymous front companies.

While the UK also works to improve financial transparency, including in the Overseas Territories and the Crown Dependencies, there is still a [perception that these remain tax havens](#). Could a vigorous US campaign against tax havens put the UK Government in a difficult position over Overseas Territories and Crown Dependencies?

2.2 Liberal interventionism?

Despite a stronger commitment to protecting democracy around the world, few observers expect any return to the [enthusiasm for intervention](#) that was perhaps characteristic of the 1990s and early 2000s. Biden, like Trump and Obama, professes a policy of reducing US military commitments, particularly in the Middle East:

...we should bring the vast majority of our troops home from the wars in Afghanistan and the Middle East and narrowly define our mission as defeating al Qaeda and the Islamic State (or ISIS). We should also end our support for the Saudi-led war in Yemen.

¹ Joseph R. Biden, Jr., Why America Must Lead Again - Rescuing U.S. Foreign Policy After Trump, *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2020

Biden does recommend the use of special forces, among other things, to continue the fight against terrorism.

On 17 November the [US announced](#) it was withdrawing nearly half of its remaining troops from Afghanistan. Defence Secretary [Ben Wallace said](#) afterwards that the UK would probably follow suit: "At the moment if the United States unilaterally pulls out of some of these countries we have a challenge".

3. "Resisting a slide to protectionism"

Biden argues that the outgoing Administration's trade policies "are hurting the American middle class" and he says directly that he believes in free trade and that the US should be able to sell in world markets. "That means taking down trade barriers that penalize Americans and resisting a dangerous global slide toward protectionism."

The UK Government counts free trade as a cornerstone of its global strategy; "[We maintain and champion free trade](#)," promised the [2015 National Security Strategy](#), and [in February 2020, the Prime Minister said](#): "We are re-emerging after decades of hibernation as a campaigner for global free trade."

With President Trump having tweeted such comments as: "...[trade wars are good, and easy to win](#)," the UK's proclaimed pro-free trade strategy should be supported by a Biden win. The UK's interest as far as a Biden trade policy is concerned centres on [getting a UK-US trade deal](#).

Janet Yellen, former Federal Reserve chair, is Biden's nomination for Treasury Secretary. She said she would work with Mr Biden's national security and foreign policy team to "[help restore America's global leadership](#)".

Biden is expected to nominate Katherine Tai, presently Chief Trade Counsel for the House Ways and Means Committee, as the US trade representative, a Cabinet post. She worked on the replacement to the NAFTA for the Trump Administration and [will consider whether to lift the tariffs](#) the outgoing Administration placed on goods from Europe and elsewhere.

3.1 US trade deal

UK is negotiating a US/UK free trade agreement to replace the EU framework that governs UK trade with the US until the end of the Brexit Transition Period. Here, the UK might find a Biden Administration more difficult to negotiate with than the present one. Biden pledges not to rush into any new trade agreements:

As president, I will not enter into any new trade agreements until we have invested in Americans and equipped them to succeed in the global economy. And I will not negotiate new deals without having labor and environmental leaders at the table in a meaningful way and without including strong enforcement provisions to hold our partners to the deals they sign.

There was also concern in Democratic circles about the UK Government's handling of negotiations with the EU and the Irish border. In September, Biden Tweeted: "[Any trade deal between the US and UK must be contingent upon respect for the \[Good Friday\] Agreement](#) and preventing the return of a hard border. Period."

On 8 December the UK Government [dropped controversial clauses](#) from [the Internal Market Bill](#) that some said threatened the Good Friday Agreement by allowing the UK to impose a customs border.

Even with that obstacle out of the way, progress may be slow. A lot of time was spent on negotiations with the outgoing Administration without yielding a deal; according to the [Financial Times](#), "...officials and trade experts acknowledge that a long road still lies ahead". Furthermore, a piece of US legislation that allows an Administration to fast-track trade deals expires in June 2021, meaning that if a deal is [not done before April](#), it will face more congressional scrutiny.

The presumed new Trade Representative, Katherine Tai, will decide whether to continue trade talks with the UK started by the outgoing Trade Representative, Robert Lighthizer. [Biden has said that domestic investment will be more important](#) to his Administration than trade deals. The Democrats are also expected to press for increased labour and environmental protections in any new trade deals, the sort of '[level playing field](#)' provisions that have been a sticking point in UK trade negotiations with the EU.

4. Multilateralism and NATO

Biden promises to re-invest in US diplomacy and strengthen historic partnerships, something that should favour the UK as an established US ally. The Democratic candidate suggested that he would place a higher value on NATO than the present Administration:

NATO is at the very heart of the United States' national security, and it is the bulwark of the liberal democratic ideal—an alliance of values, which makes it far more durable, reliable, and powerful than partnerships built by coercion or cash.

In November Biden named Antony Blinken as his candidate for Secretary of State, in charge of US foreign relations. *Politico* described Blinken as a "[Europeanist, multilateralist, internationalist](#)" with lifelong personal ties to Europe. Blinken is a defender of NATO, and [criticised](#) Trump's plan to remove troops from Germany as "foolish" and "spiteful".

The UK would be expected to welcome a US Administration that cultivated historical alliances and was more reassuring about the future of NATO.

In July, Biden pledged to re-join the World Health Organisation; Trump had announced his intention to withdraw from the WHO over the organisations's handling of the coronavirus pandemic. A US Administration that engaged more with multilateral organisations such as the WHO would probably be considered in British interests, although the [UK Government declined to criticise the US plan](#) to withdraw from the WHO.

The UK chairs the Group of Seven (G7) in 2021 and will use that as an opportunity to work on shared goals with the new Administration. The Prime Minister [telephoned the President-elect on 10 November](#) to congratulate him on his victory, and during the call he invited Joe Biden to the G7 summit 2021.

EU and Brexit

Biden describes the European Union as one of "our closest allies". [Others describe Biden](#) as "a lifelong transatlanticist with strong links to many of Europe's most important leaders".

Until Donald Trump made clear he [thought of the EU as a "foe"](#), supporting the EU was the policy of successive Administrations and a Biden Administration will continue to be supportive of EU integration.

The UK's final exit from the EU is happening just as pro-EU President is entering the White House. As well as running counter to the internationalist ideas of the new Administration, Brexit demolishes a traditional pillar of UK foreign policy: for the UK to act as a bridge between the EU and the US. This could leave any "special relationship" weakened.

5. Climate change

President Trump announced that he was [pulling the US from the Paris Accord in 2017](#). The UK remains committed to the Paris Accord, however, and will host the [Conference of the Parties in November 2021](#) in Glasgow. On climate change, Biden's policy coincides with UK policy:

I will rejoin the Paris climate agreement on day one of a Biden administration and then convene a summit of the world's major carbon emitters, rallying nations to raise their ambitions and push progress further and faster.

Some commentators suggest that leadership on the climate crisis is "[Boris Johnson's chance to woo Biden](#)". The [UK has announced targets for greenhouse emissions](#) that it describes as "ambitious" in the run-up to Glasgow.

In November Biden announced the creation of a new Climate Envoy post and [nominated former Secretary of State John Kerry to it](#). Creating a new post and choosing such a high-profile nominee confirms that climate change is a high priority.

6. Non-proliferation

6.1 Iran

The UK was one of the instigators of the process that led to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) nuclear deal with Iran. The Government was [disappointed by the US departure](#) from the deal and has continued to work with EU allies to [keep the JCPOA alive](#).

On the Iran nuclear deal, the President-elect's policy aligns with UK policy:

Tehran must return to strict compliance with the deal. If it does so, I would rejoin the agreement and use our renewed commitment to diplomacy to work with our allies to strengthen and extend it, while more effectively pushing back against Iran's other destabilizing activities.

Whether Biden will be able to revive the JCPOA is another matter, however. The Trump Administration's recent moves, such as imposing a new round of sanctions on Iran in the autumn, may make reviving the JCPOA more difficult. The [UK, France and Germany quietly opposed the new sanctions](#).

6.2 New START

Biden also favours extending the New START nuclear weapons limitation treaty between the US and Russia, and to "use that as the foundation for new arms control arrangements." This chimes with UK policy as set out in a [PQ answer in May 2020](#): "We support its continued implementation and have encouraged the US to extend New START while negotiating any successor agreement".

The Trump Administration may beat the election, however, and agree a one-year extension of New START. On 21 October [the US Ambassador to NATO said](#) that an agreement was "close at hand".

7. Personal problems?

Despite some shared objectives, personal and political differences could arise with a Biden Administration. The immediate problem over the Northern Ireland border may have been

settled, but Brexit may anyway have [convinced Democrats that France and Germany are more valuable](#) and influential European partners. Biden's picks for jobs in the Administration include many veterans of the Obama era and there may still be [some harsh views](#), after spats during the Brexit referendum.

Some argue that the UK Government expected and would have preferred a Trump victory. [Patrick Wintour in *the Guardian*](#) says there is a personal relationship: "...there are personal and political advantages for Johnson in four more years of Trump".

[Roger Boyes argues in *The Times*](#) that, while Biden will not re-establish any "special relationship", a Trump victory wouldn't in fact have helped:

Britain's dilemma is becoming increasingly obvious. Even if Trump were to be re-elected there's every chance that he would come back as a more radicalised presence, no longer beholden to cautious advisers and driven only by the desire to get the domestic economy going again. Trump's teenagerish joyride while under Covid treatment could be a foretaste of what's to come: a messianic president unchained. That makes the Johnson government's dream of becoming a mediator between a difficult-to-decode Washington and a nervous, over-censorious Europe all but impossible.

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