

The Biden Administration: A Return to Multilateralism?

Conference “The New US Administration and Perspectives For Southeast Asia and the Philippines”

Manila, The Philippines

August 27, 2021

Karin L. Johnston, Ph.D.
American University
Washington, D.C.



THE TRANSATLANTIC
POLICY CENTER

a Jean Monnet Center of Excellence

Our Discussion

- ▶ Biden Administration: A New U.S. Foreign Policy Direction
- ▶ Multilateralism in a Recalibrated U.S. Foreign Policy
- ▶ Multilateralism and Strategic Competition in Southeast Asia



Gage Skidmore / CC BY-SA 2.0 • Tia Dufour / The White House

Multilateralism:

“...coordinating relations among three or more states in accordance with certain principles.” (John Ruggie)

Statements: A Revitalized U.S. Foreign Policy

“America is Back”

President Biden speech, February 4, 2021

“There’s no longer a bright line between foreign and domestic policy. Every action we take in our conduct abroad, we must take with American working families in mind. Advancing a foreign policy for the middle class demands urgent focus on our domestic economic renewal.”

“We will compete from a position of strength by

- ▶ building back better at home,
- ▶ working with our allies and partners,
- ▶ renewing our role in international institutions,
- ▶ and reclaiming our credibility and moral authority, much of which has been lost.”

Statements on Multilateralism

Secretary of State Antony Blinken, speech to UN Assembly, May 7, 2021

“Now, some question whether multilateral cooperation is still possible. The United States believes it is not only possible, it is imperative.”

“Multilateralism is still our best tool for tackling big global challenges...”

“...Likewise, it’s not enough simply to defend the rules-based order we have now.

- We should improve and build upon it.
- We need to take into account the change in power dynamics over the past eight decades...
- We need to address legitimate grievances that have provoked a backlash against an open international economic order in many countries...
- And we must ensure that this order is equipped to address new problems – like national security and human rights concerns raised by new technologies...”

Return to Multilateralism: Three dimensions

“America is Back”: US Leadership

Cooperative Multilateralism: Alliances

“Strategic Competition”: China

I. US Leadership

- ▶ Positive:
 - ▶ Deliberate reversal of destructive policies and tactics of Trump
 - ▶ Experienced senior officials
 - ▶ Lead with US diplomacy (no more “forever wars”)
 - ▶ Biden administration prioritizing Indo-Pacific region (next slide)
- ▶ Worrisome:
 - ▶ Decline of US leadership role, trust, credibility
 - ▶ Domestic political constraints: polarization, partisanship
 - ▶ Domestic social and economic tensions
 - ▶ Time frame
 - ▶ Weakening of elite foreign policy consensus

Recently appointed Administration Officials



Kurt Campbell: "Indo-Pacific Coordinator",
National Security Council



Katherine Tai: US
Trade Representative



Ely Ratner, Special Assistant
To Secretary of Defense



Melanie Hart, China Policy Coordinator
for the Office of the Undersecretary of State
for Economic Growth, Energy and Environment

II. Alliances and Partnerships:

- ▶ Positive:
 - ▶ Again, rejection of Trump unilateralism, nativism, transnationalism, isolationism
 - ▶ INSSG: “ ...many of the biggest threats we face respect no borders or walls, and must be met with collective action...” (p. 7)
 - ▶ i.e. acknowledgement of transnational nature of global challenges and role expanding global partnerships in diverse institutional structures will play (ex: “Transnational Issues” chapter in Annual Threat Assessment, DNI)
- ▶ Worrisome:
 - ▶ Jake Sullivan: this is the “ ..time for rescuing American exceptionalism”
 - ▶ Protectionist strains in US political elite
 - ▶ Rhetoric is easy, getting collective action is much harder



source: Hudson Institute



Source: European University Institute



<https://middleeastandislamicstudies.ucr.edu/>

Alliances and Multilateralism:

part of a larger strategy
of adjusting to the new
US strategic paradigm

Diplomatic Charm Offensive: applied cooperative multilateralism

Wendy Sherman, US Deputy Secretary of State

- ▶ Trip to Cambodia June 1, 2021
- ▶ Trip to China July 26, 2021

US Secretary of Defense General Lloyd Austin

- ▶ Trip to Japan, South Korea, India, March 13, 2021
- ▶ Trip Vietnam, Singapore, Philippines, July 23, 2021

US Secretary of State Tony Blinken

- ▶ Trip to India, July 28, 2021

Linda Thomas-Greenfield, U.S. Ambassador to UN

- ▶ Meeting with India's Foreign Secretary Harsh Shringla, July 15, 2021

Vice President Kamala Harris

- ▶ Trip to Singapore and Vietnam, August 22, 2021

Southeast Asia: "The Canary in the Coal Mine"



III. China: strategic competition

Blinken: US policy will be:

- *competitive* when it should be,
- *collaborative* when it can be,
- *adversarial* when it must be.

(Speech, March 3, 2021)

- ▶ Biden: will take multilateral approach to China by enlisting support of allies and partners to maximize U.S. leverage on China
- ▶ Issue: many of regional powers in Indo-Pacific have adapted to new economic and strategic reality...
- ▶ Complexity: almost all issues on global agenda intersect with China and will require multilateral coordination: Covid-19, climate change, trade, technology/digital technology, security/defense, democracy and human rights
- ▶ the key question is: what issues will be placed in which categories?

Return to Multilateralism?

“Rescue Multilateralism”?

“Reboot” Multilateralism?

Universal Multilateralism vs. Values-based, small group multilateralism?

- ▶ Can the current system of multilateralism be repaired, or do we need a new one?
- ▶ If it's not the system *per se* but its stakeholders, how do you build mechanisms into the system to hold powers accountable?

Discussion to Follow...

