

## **Foreign Policy during the Biden Presidency: Probabilities and Realistic Expectations**

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Predictably, there has been much recent discussion in Georgian media over the political line of the Biden administration as well as over the possible developments of U.S. policy, and several potential scenarios have frequently been forecast. These discussions are of course particularly necessary given the overall importance of U.S. foreign policy to the formation of a system of international relations and of the defense by our main ally of our country's interests within the framework of the U.S.-Georgia strategic partnership.

We are therefore keenly attuned to any unusual, essential or uncertain changes of U.S. foreign policy, and have particular expectations as well. Every change or political U-turn in Washington is directly linked to the present Georgian state and its prospects for development. In addition, these changes send messages to other forces in the region; miscommunicating or misjudging these messages could easily lead to a strengthening of harmful tendencies and the further limitation of Georgian or Western interests.

Scholars and analysts of foreign affairs in Georgia are actively analyzing the Biden administration's foreign policy. This topic is regularly covered in Georgian print media as well as on television—but it is one that can never be published or discussed too much, as every new word or opinion could lead parties to pursue their analysis, re-evaluate their attitudes towards this or the other issue, or encourage the correction of already “reserved” decisions or approaches. This article was written with this in mind. Certain opinions expressed in it will seem quite debatable to many readers, and it is hoped that it will encourage the further development of this discussion.

### **Recent Zig-zags**

America's foreign policy is notorious for the zig-zags of its development. This is no-one's fault and does not betray a lack of consistency, but is simply the result of the constant real-world shifts of the international order between different stages of the post-Cold War era. In order to better perceive the problems linked to implementing a “Grand Strategy”, it would suffice to remember

that, over the past three decades alone, the world (and U.S. foreign policy alongside it) has greatly evolved since the end of the Cold War. A unipolar world gave way to the stage of the war against global terrorism, and the current stage is that of great geopolitical confrontation. Under these circumstances, developing and following a stable foreign policy naturally became extremely challenging. The absence of a systemic approach was also compounded by the very unusual and unpredictable factor of Donald Trump's presidency, which was characterized by decisions based upon personal perceptions of global issues and their "transactional" value. This enflamed existing challenges even further, and created fertile ground for new risks.

Contemporary American researchers are trying to draw comparisons between the country's most recent foreign and diplomatic policies and present or past teachings. This academic study is particularly focused upon the Obama-Trump-Biden triangle, since these presidencies mark the period when new elements emerged in U.S. policy towards "the rest of the world". Under Biden, this process will most likely acquire new contours, and the global coronavirus pandemic has of course also contributed to changes which have shifted the relatively stagnant old postulates of the international system away from a "dead point" to enable and activate a rearrangement of the global economic agenda (albeit on a still mostly theoretical rather than practical level).

The evolution of the international system and the influence of U.S. foreign policy on this process is naturally an inexhaustible source of discussion, publication, interest and passions. In the end, this process creates a multitude of print or electronic materials in which different authors attempt to prove, academically, the alignment of this or that "strategy" with one of the four main schools of U.S. foreign policy (Jefferson, Jackson, Hamilton, Wilson). But what makes this task even more difficult is the fact that modern progressive, libertarian, realist, liberal-internationalist schools of thoughts have been added to the so-called list of "classical" schools, rendering any discussion of "who's right and who's wrong" not only confusing but in some cases even pointless.

Genuine interest has of course driven us towards such disputes, in many of which we have certainly taken part, and we would like to confirm our deepest respect for academic research and recognize the need to support and perfect the application of schools of thought to practical politics. And yet it should be mentioned that the acidity of current challenges requires any such theory to be applied as closely as possible to concrete reality and to be refined in order to permit real decision making, as well the establishment of an organic link between expert observation and specific tasks.

In order to better explain U.S. foreign policy to our readers, these requirements would have encouraged us to simplify this foreign policy by formulating it in the following way: Washington's desire and readiness to play an active role on the world stage. It is noteworthy, however, that the degree of this activity varies according to different levels, and that the geographical area of declared U.S. involvement is comparably wide or small. However, it is significant that, in general, these changes have only been voiced, since the flow of global affairs as well as the special role of the United States in world stability and the avoidance of large-scale cataclysms has been, and is, unprecedented.

Taking these agreements and predictions into consideration, we would like to touch upon the already defined and possible accents of the Biden administration's foreign policy—particularly as identifying, analyzing and properly understanding them is so important for the health of Georgia's domestic policy and for the real effectiveness of her foreign policy. In other words, we must arm ourselves with all the knowledge we need to better pursue Georgia's national interests.

## **Specificities of the New Administration's Foreign Policy Course**

### ***Personal Character***

Against the background of the Obama and Trump administrations, the foreign policy course of the new Biden presidency will naturally be distinguished by several elements. Yet, that said, we believe that we should not expect radical changes. This is quite a bold assumption, but we will try explain why we believe this to be true.

For lovers of theoretical parallels, we will begin by noting that the new president does not belong to this or that foreign policy school of thought or camp. His very rich history of international relations points to his inclination for private contacts and links, which must be especially interesting for Georgians. Accordingly, it will presumably be difficult over the next four years to distinguish (as we have been used to doing in the past) a so-called U.S. "Grand Strategy" on the foreign stage with orderly form and content. Obviously, by the end of the Biden presidency, academic circles will eagerly start to define a "Biden Doctrine." This is only natural: every president of the American super-state leaves his mark. However, we believe that placing such a doctrine into any kind of ideological "ism" will be difficult, and that it will mainly be a mixture of already tried and modified components. The main question is how orderly and effective this doctrine will be, and this only time can show.

### ***Inner Flows***

Among America's foreign policy schools of thought, realism has always been prominent thanks to many distinguished scientists or scholars (Morgenthau, Waltz, Mearsheimer, Walt and others). However, when seeking to define a practical policy, this very interesting and prestigious school (in its different forms) has always fallen under the different influences of international liberalism. Objectively speaking, this prioritization has its historical explanation (the bitter experiences of two world wars) as well as its practical justification and benefits. None of these can be rejected, particularly as the mere attempt to do so would be a great injustice.

It is noteworthy that, already at the beginning of the Obama presidency, the "World Policeman" approach began to be revised, and several theories acquired a conceptual form under Trump. During the "ups and downs" of both periods, we spoke in many publications of a certain

renaissance of realism (and as some refer to it: egoism) in foreign policy, and we will not stop here to mention this again. The question now is: Will the United States continue to withdraw from participating in global processes, or will it go back to its usual activity under Biden? This is a very important and interesting question for the world, and has deep meaning for Georgia.

A quick answer to this question would be that, in our opinion, neither of the two above-mentioned expectations will completely come to pass, and that the Biden administration's foreign policy course will mostly be intermediate. Explaining the reasons for this format is difficult, but we will try to do so nevertheless.

Let us begin by considering the degree of inertia of this or that foreign policy course of a country of such scale and role as the U.S.; this also touches upon opposition to radical change by a state machine acting with the same inertia and "dominant" experts acting in an organized manner. As a so-called "Bidenish" counterweight to such opposition, we would consider the formation of the new administration (especially the State Department, National Security Council and other levels of the security system), but our expectations in this regard can be no more than moderate when we remember that many key figures of the new administration were already employed under Obama. By the way, an evaluation of the current personnel policy concluded that the election of Biden is a "third term" of Obama's presidency. This comparison is no doubt an exaggeration, but it should be considered from the point of view of the Black Sea region and Georgia (not forgetting the useless "restarts" and general caution of the Obama era).

It is a fact that pragmatic analysts unhesitatingly believe in the need to "revolutionize" relations between the United States and the Black Sea region and Georgia. They and we (and others) will presumably see over the next two years at the most whether we are right to expect our strategic ally to properly evaluate this issue and begin to act.

Here we should mention the importance of the need for systemic and large-scale co-operation with U.S. and Western analytical and research centers. The assumption that decisions are solely based upon the information circulating through official Western channels is false: regarding this or that issue, decisions are very often already made before they reach formal processes, and we Georgians should therefore be more proactive during the initial stages, or else our partners will struggle to achieve the "cumulative efficacy" that we need.

### ***Obstacles to "Procedural Democracy"?***

Among its many benefits to decision making, representative democracy in the United States is distinguished by a certain degree of "democratic coquettishness". Despite the wide constitutional mandate that the President enjoys in matters of foreign policy (mostly through executive orders and executive privileges), he shares the stage with the Senate, whose support is a necessary political and legal requirement when carrying out certain basic functions. Given

the Democrats' insignificant advantage in both houses (when this article was published), Biden's freedom of action will therefore be quite limited.

This circumstance underlines the particular importance of using every available opportunity, way and format to intensify contacts with American lawmakers. Lobbyists acting on behalf of Georgia's interests as well as other similar actors are sufficiently aware of this, but it is vital that this knowledge be transformed into practical, tangible actions that will achieve real results—particularly as current challenges and development prospects deny our country the luxury to waste precious resources on pursuing current trends.

### ***And “Ideology” Once Again***

America's foreign policy course has always been characterized by its association with euphonious ideals, which from the Second World War onwards have included and still include supporting democracy and human rights around the world. Alongside other aspects, this represented America's “soft power”, but this has not always been wielded successfully and in its execution has not always been associated with “softness”. In any case, it is a fact that the efforts of the American government and society rest upon the pursuit of democratic principles at home and their establishment abroad. One result of these efforts (and of overall Western political support) is our present enjoyment of a resurrected Georgian statehood.

But every great story has its own “but”, and in this case the latter is most visible at the Obama-Trump-Biden presidential crossroads and is much more relevant. In short, this “but” requires an alignment between America's overall foreign policy principles—greater involvement in global processes—with the urgency of the current need to pay more attention to the acute economic and social challenges that American society is facing. This “but” logically implies the establishment of a new and economically self-sufficient formation capable of dealing with this contemporary crisis. Alongside many other aspects, this “but” is also linked to the possible “reformatting” of U.S. foreign policy that we will discuss in greater detail below.

### **Novelties they have promised Us—And Us**

According to several comments made by members of Biden's circle of advisors, over the following four years the main accent of U.S. foreign policy will be placed upon the country's “middle class”. This statement is noteworthy for several reasons that we will briefly try to explain below.

The theory that foreign policy is the continuation of domestic policy was formulated long ago, but the complex and conflicting processes that America is currently witnessing give this theory greater meaning and depth. First of all, one must consider the degree of economic inequality that exists between Americans and the social imbalance and dangerous political confrontations to which it gives rise. We have previously spoken about the essence of these events, and will now

therefore only repeat that, instead of the “constructive disruption” that development requires, the current and ongoing “destructive disruption” threatens the foundations of civil stability—barely a step away from the disruption of the very foundations of the state.

The response to these quite dangerous processes is the “Building Back Better” program that Biden presented during the pre-election period, the essence of which is regular care for American families (as opposed to only during crises). This principle of American society that is linked to turning foreign policy into future achievable and tangible results is also a continuation of this same electoral line.

Two main aspects of this policy are of particular interest to us. The first of these is the U.S. administration’s views on reforming the State Department and its current tasks—a circumstance that we could link to an indirect reminder of the need for a healthy evaluation of the possibilities of Georgia’s foreign and diplomatic agencies, of their modernization needs and their alignment with contemporary requirements. It is vital that Georgia maintain these agencies not as a mere attribute of her sovereignty and tribute to her statehood, but instead as an orderly, effective and efficient organization with clear benefits. We mentioned recently that the need to rearrange Georgia’s state institutions and bureaucratic system in general is growing more pressing, and we will add that a competitive and accountable Georgia needs properly functioning public institutions since it is these that create and maintain the country’s image, and these that can be a source of pride when facing our current world and the challenges of its transformation.

The second, and very important, aspect linked to the domestic focus of the Biden administration’s foreign policy is defined by a very complex equation: To what extent will concentrating on internal problems affect the quality of the United States’ initiatives and the resources available in order for the country to have a real impact on ongoing processes far from its borders? This question becomes even more relevant if we look at it from the point of view of our national and regional agenda and consider the need for the undivided attention and support of our strategic ally.

It is obviously impossible to associate the new foreign policy of the current U.S. administration with the course of Trump’s “America First” approach. Such a comparison (for the time being, in any case) would be quite groundless and not serious, yet certain tendencies (including legitimate ones!) do exist and could be discerned in the overall picture, which is not only linked to American society but to others as well. In a few words, these tendencies are more egocentrism in international relations and an excessive desire to subjugate “social goods” to your “own benefits”. This is of course nothing new in the global system, but it has gained prominence against the background of recent developments, and quite a few countries have elevated this approach practically to the level of state policy.

All this is noteworthy for Georgia, as our levels of domestic and foreign vulnerability do not permit us the luxury of remaining calm at this stage or indeed in the foreseeable future, particularly considering the new world order towards which we are all rushing. This fact requires

us to maintain a constant vigilance and readiness for renewal, for rapid alignment with modern requirements, and for the systematic and practical development and modernization of our national and state “identity”—which makes us wonder what Georgia’s self-sufficient statehood should look like and how it could benefit the region—but this is naturally another conversation.

### **Highly Probable Positives**

Of course, first of all these positive aspects will imply more systematic and solidary foreign policy processes and greater responsibility when studying, preparing and making decisions. Its accompanying and characteristic “procedural” components would most likely be increased consultations, summaries and exchanges of opinion—both with relevant actors within the United States as well as with the country’s allies and partners abroad.

Along with other benefits, this approach would serve as a precondition for improved and more competent management, whose measure would be an essential factor for evaluating the American political process itself as well as for analyzing and underlining its achievements and failings. But equally essential is that, by doing so, Biden’s administration would be taking an important step towards restoring trust among the country’s partners and strengthening the United States’ deserved reputation and renown among the international community. High levels of trust and reputation are not only necessary for the United States, but equally so for placing ongoing global processes into predictable and relatively manageable frameworks. International order and stability are also linked to these factors, whose restoration requires more concrete and practical aid.

We will add here (recognizing that many will find this assumption quite disputable) that, besides many problems, Trump’s presidency also left some positive things behind for Biden. This can be seen in the revision of many global problems (and in the growing need for such revision, e.g. the clumsiness of international organizations) as well as in a few “hushed-up” themes that were given names (e.g. renewing the Western security system by increasing the shared responsibility of every member state). Trump’s presidency also applied new methods to international politics which, in the right hands and if maintained in proper working condition, could achieve desirable results (e.g. ongoing developments between Israel and several Middle Eastern countries).

### **In short...**

Many things undoubtedly depend on this administration, both from the domestic American point of view as well as from international perspectives. We have already mentioned that expectations for a “revolutionized” American foreign policy are exaggerated, but the fact remains that, over the next four years and in terms of a newly formed global order, we will witness many novelties. That said, we should of course not expect a “New World” to be firmly established during this period, as this is a much lengthier process which will depend on many factors. What can safely

be said, however, is that several load-bearing walls of this new world will be built during Biden's presidency.

In conclusion, we will limit ourselves to a few main assumptions:

**Ideology:** The era of global ideological lines (and therefore of “Grand Strategies”) is long gone. But for lovers of strategy, we would add that the word “strategy” will of course not disappear from the political vocabulary: “Grand Strategy” will be replaced by “Emergent Strategy”, which allows for greater mobility, flexibility, alignment and improvisation. With this radical transformation, we are entering a world in which positioning oneself without hiding one's own interests will be acceptable etiquette. This makes Georgia's efforts to maximize our self-sufficiency as quickly as possible even more relevant. In turn, this can only be done by maximizing the realization of our national potential and of the resources our partners have allocated us.

**The United States and the rest of the world:** The time has come for the United States on the world stage when our strategic partner will less often have to define its approach to ongoing events solely based upon its own vision, and will instead increasingly have to consider the approaches of others towards such issues. In short, a new phase of geopolitical and geo-economic competitiveness is only now gathering strength. Under these conditions, the words and real actions of any partner country, regardless of its size and power, become important for the United States. This is especially true of those countries or regions in which the geopolitical conditions for Georgian-Western interests have significantly worsened, and is in direct correlation with our current sustainability when we consider political, economic and security issues.

**Georgia and the United States:** We have mentioned Georgian diplomacy above in relation to the country's statehood and overall institutional structure. But let us for a moment forget about novel structures of international relations and the legal entities they encompass. It is vital to shift our country's management style to a more corporate one, as this would improve decision-making processes, encourage greater rationalism in their execution, and increase our perception of domestic and foreign challenges. We have often said that this also requires us to properly define our state's functional benefits through the prism of our regional and strategic partner. We have many achievement and success on this road which also enables us to build something new on it. With the same point of view, even the U.S.-Georgia Charter on Strategic Partnership creates a long-term perspective. But one thing remains: this perspective requires opportunities to be seized in a full and timely manner. As for what our tasks must be, these must be bold (and “achievable”!) initiatives coming from Tbilisi, instead of merely waiting for someone to remember us and enquire. The inertia of our post-independence period has gone on for too long and must be overcome.

In this extremely difficult process, we wish our ally and ourselves every success. The existing challenges are as great and as complex as our special co-operation and strategic partnership are necessary and promising.