

SCARCITY AND STRATEGY: THE FOREIGN POLICY OF THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION

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Bernard Brodie, one of the progenitors of post-cold war strategic studies used to say that “strategy wears a dollar sign”. States have many foreign and security policy goals from which to choose. But resources of every kind are always scarce. It is the task of strategy to set priorities for the allocation of scarce resources. Though policy analysts across the world are trying to guess what will be the contours of the Biden Administration’s grand strategy, statements alone do not get us very far. A fundamental question is whether he and his advisors perceive resource scarcity or resource plenty. Below I make some guesses based on the assumption that they see a world of scarcity.

What kinds of scarcity does the Administration face? First is a scarcity of extant military resources. With a defence budget of \$700 billion per year one wonders how such resources could be scarce. But they are. Modern military power is enormously costly to purchase and to operate. A casual reading of the US military press suggests that the US force has been worked too hard in the last two decades. It is for this reason that one now hears that the Pentagon plans to focus anew on great power wars. The implication is that turning away from nation-building and counter-insurgency will free resources to contain Russia and China. But Russia and China are not minor military competitors. And though it seems possible that Russia will have a difficult time sustaining its recent military improvements, China has barely scratched the surface of what it can do. Extant military resources are already scarce.

Second, the Administration faces a scarcity of money. Though there are certainly western economists who claim that advanced economies can continue to borrow vast sums not only to fight and recover from the pandemic, but to address climate change and income inequality, there are others who would say that this cannot go on forever. Even if the Democrats take the Senate, it is unlikely that they will be comfortable simply adding to the deficit both to fix the US, and to continue to defend all the extended ramparts of the “US-led liberal world order”. Biden has won the Presidency largely on Donald Trump’s failure to look after the US public. Fighting the pandemic, and then fixing the economy will be job No. 1 for Biden.

Third, despite the President’s convincing double victories in the popular and the electoral votes, he nevertheless faces a scarcity of political capital. The American politics pundits agree: his coattails were short. There was no blue wave to bring him deep political reserves of support in the House and Senate and in the State legislatures. Donald Trump’s total popular vote was the second greatest in US history, Biden’s total the first. President Biden will need to husband his political capital. He will spend it on the issues that will yield him the greatest political support, and those are domestic.

If President elect Biden and his advisors see these constraints, how might it affect what they actually do? Even a casual reading of Biden’s March 2020 *Foreign Affairs* article “Why America Must Lead Again”, suggests that US internal problems loom large: fixing up the US polity, society, and economy consumes the first half of the article. And anyone who paid much attention to the recent presidential campaign would have noticed that foreign policy played a minor role. The principal discussion was about which candidate would be harder on China. This gives us a hint as to where the major overseas priority of the Administration will be – Asia, because the candidates vied with one another expressing a hard line. Polling data (if such can be quoted with a straight face in the US, after the predictive failures of the last two presidential campaigns) suggests that the public is

quite concerned about China, though some have economic concerns while others have security concerns. Containing China is popular in both the Democratic and Republican parties. As Biden wants to work with Republicans, the containment of China may be the path of least resistance to some bipartisan policy successes. China's rise would be a serious security matter even if the American public were not interested. A focus on China in US foreign and security policy, to include trade and technology, is thus almost inevitable. And given the size of the China challenge, and the scarcity of security resources, there is not going to be much left for anything else.

The rest of America's allies should take some comfort from a return to normalcy at least in terms of the US foreign policy process. But allies in Europe and the Middle East should take note. Sure, the Biden administration will work multilaterally on problems of collective concern, such as nuclear proliferation, climate change, and even trade. But it may not be long before those who hope for a return to the old days find themselves disappointed. President elect Biden says many nice things about the Transatlantic Alliance. But if scarcity is real, he will be looking for a better bargain. All agree that a European-US partnership to address the neo-mercantilist aspects of Chinese foreign policy would be of great help. The European Union would loom large in such a partnership, though Americans frankly do not quite understand the Union and how it works. But saying this does not make it so. Europeans will need to organize their own China strategy, and find areas of overlap with the US. Europe depends far more on international trade than does the US. It is likely that Europeans will need to make some hard choices about how hard-nosed they wish to be on China, and these choices may not overlap with those of the US. Similarly, Europeans will notice, if they have not already noticed, that Asia is a magnet for US military resources. US interest in military burden-sharing antedates President Trump, even if it was expressed more artfully. The situation is getting worse. The European members of NATO are, due to distance, inefficient contributors to the military containment of China. They are, however, potentially very efficient contributors to the containment of Russia. Expect continuing pressure to do more.

Finally, what shall we expect of policy for the greater Middle East? Israel will be fine, but not the Palestinians. It is simply not worth the political cost for a US President to pressure Israel to do much of anything. As we move eastward, however, things get interesting. President elect Biden and his advisors seem to take climate change quite seriously. So do European statespersons. Sooner or later the fundamental question will arise: why should the US continue to commit blood and treasure to the Persian Gulf to defend a low price for the oil that we now know to be poisonous to the planet? And given an aroused progressive wing of the Democratic Party, why defend profoundly illiberal regimes that show no sign of reform whatsoever? Why defend a cartel that periodically fixes the price of oil in order to bankrupt US domestic producers, and put their employees out of work? There will be cross cutting pressures of course. Iran simply has no friends in the US and has no way to get any. Oil prices and supply will matter to prosperity in the west for perhaps another decade. The Arab petro-states effectively use the main tool at their disposal – money – to garner influence in Washington. But the gravitational pull of petroleum on policy is beginning to wane and US policy-makers will focus their attention elsewhere.

These projections depend on Biden and his advisors' perceptions of scarce resources. But perhaps resources will prove more plentiful than I imagine. The shortages of military, financial, and political capital discussed above could be evanescent. The US economy is quite resilient and innovative. Our opponents may prove less strong than they appear at present. The American public might at heart be as outward looking and internationalist as some pollsters contend, and never again support

Trumpian transactionalism. The clever and well-resourced US military may come up with another wave of technological innovations that leave their opponents' heads spinning. If these emerge quickly as the actual facts of the case, then US allies in Europe can return to the happy days of the late 1990s, when security was a free good provided by a benevolent hegemon at the helm of the liberal world order. But I would not bet on it.

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