



The Cambridge Security Initiative

## THE TEMPERATURE IN WASHINGTON

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APRIL 2021

Stefan Halper

When asked about President Trump’s ignominious departure from the White House, most Americans saw it as a defining event. They could agree on little else—and the divisions have since worsened. Some 48% believed the election was “stolen” by Biden’s Democrats and about the same per cent awoke the next morning with a feeling of “profound relief”. They said they were tired of “Trump’s chaos”, confrontation and his revenge politics.

Opinion was sharply polarized reflecting the media coverage (CNN/FOX) of political events and personalities. Expert narratives—left and right—underscored these hardening views; this was just the tip of the pyramid. They reflected the deep ethnic, regional and community beliefs that had elected their representatives to political office. The national polity had become a divided mosaic where pro-Trump and pro-Biden groupings confronted each other but were themselves divided. This included many “single-issue” action groups (anti-abortion, pro-gun, Black Lives Matter, Blue LivesMatter,etc.).

Not surprisingly, the newly elected President and the ex-President approached the convulsed political reality with vastly different objectives. Trump, for example, wanted to solidify his 76 million-vote political base. He emphasized five points:

- (1) that the election had been stolen—and that he had won;
- (2) that Republicans must delay the Biden Administration’s transition to power with court challenges and street protests across the country;
- (3) that Biden would install a radical-left Administration, if allowed;
- (4) that Biden would abandon the “America First” policy causing the US to become unbalanced and eventually overtaken by



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Chinese mercantilism; (5) that Biden's policies would lead to a flood of immigrants, compromise the civic culture and would eventually solidify the Democratic control of Congress.

Even the most common-sense decisions like wearing a mask or being vaccinated became highly politicized, with urban/rural and regional differences worn like a badge.

These tensions culminated in a deadly assault on January 6th when Trump supporters tried to seize the Capital as the Senate counted votes to certify Biden's win. Five were killed and over a 100 were injured. Twenty-four hour media coverage brought the horrible attack on the nation's main institutions to the public with the result that Trump was placed on the defensive and Biden gained approval. The post-election days were almost without precedent. Donald Trump was the first president in 150 years not to attend the inauguration of his successor-presaging the bitter partisanship in the months ahead.

Biden's objective was to form a government. His message was inclusion. He notably appointed several African American, Hispanic and Native Americans to his cabinet, Administration and the Judiciary. This generally pleased the hard left but Senator Bernie Sanders, Representative Alexandria Ocasio Cortez and others, still stood in opposition believing this was not enough. Biden advocated for a \$1.9 trillion bill to aid the economy. He declared the virus—with over 500,000 dead—a national emergency promising to vaccinate 2 million people a day and called for 2 trillion dollars to contain Covid. Biden was heavily criticized by Republicans, and some Democrats, for assuming too much debt and risking inflation.

Meanwhile, on the global stage, Biden trumpeted--after four uncertain years--"America is back". The US would once again commit to the Democratic principles and values it had embraced from WW 2 to 2016 and which formed the foundation of the world order. He reached out to reassure allies and embraced NATO, the UN, and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), among other agreements, to restore faith in American participation in global affairs. To that end, US Secretary of State Anthony Blinkin and



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National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan met with heads of state in Korea and Japan before seeing the Chinese Foreign Minister in March for a fraught two-day exchange of views. Both the US and China outlined their views of global affairs, and of the other's policies and attitudes. China asserted that the US was a condescending super-power in decline and challenged Washington to adjust to a "new world order". They demanded the US cease meddling in China's internal affairs by which they meant human rights issues and other policies in Hong Kong, Tibet, Taiwan and Xingjang province. The Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, pointedly claimed the South China Sea as an internal Chinese waterway and warned the US Navy to cease Freedom of Navigation exercises and war games in the area.

Revealing Biden's revamped China policy, Blinkin made clear the US view that the South China Sea is an international waterway and that the US Navy would meet any challenge in the region. He rejected the Chinese claim that their advances in Artificial Intelligence and secure communications would alter the balance in China's favor.

Blinkin underscored that the China-Russia condominium which anticipates a confrontation between a democratic world order and an authoritarian order would illustrate the strengths of open democratic societies, not their weaknesses. Nonetheless, the meeting adjourned on a somewhat neutral note. Clearing the air suggested, at least, some progress in the effort to find common ground. This meeting and Biden's harsh comments about Russian President Vladimir Putin made clear that Putin and Xi would not enjoy the same latitude as they had under Trump.

The path for Biden has not been a smooth one. A narrow 50-51 Senate majority, an aggressive Conservative media, a recovering economy, inflation fears and worries about a rising China have given fuel to his opposition. But his approval stands at 64%-- some 21 points higher than Trump's four-year average. Still approval ratings change like the weather. A fickle public will demand that Biden work with his critics and realize the promises—infrastructure development, Covid containment and a carbon-neutral future—that were hallmarks of his campaign. That is what presidents must do.