FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY 16.11.2020

The global reaction to the US elections

Trump is out, Biden is in — so how are friends and foes reacting? Dispatches from China, Russia, Great Britain and Brazil

Read this article in German.

China

Those in charge of propaganda in China are following the US presidential changeover with mixed feelings. On the one hand because Trump was a godsend, China's best man for the job. All they had to do was translate the tweets coming straight from the President's gut and their citizens got the impression that the nation was in self-destruction mode. The Chinese expect their top politicians to appear dignified in public, in the way that the British do vis-à-vis their queen. Trump's erratic messages in vulgar language have left the Chinese public with an image of America's cultural decline as drawn by its highest authority. On the other hand, the Chinese authorities are laughing because Trump had made their work almost superfluous. Twitter cannot be taken out of context. In a Biden era, however, contextualisation and explanation will be needed again.

Meanwhile, its political analysts are weighing things more carefully. On the positive side, they expect to be able to reach agreements with a Biden administration that will remain binding past the day of their signing. For example, those responsible for climate policy in China also need to overcome opposition. Bans, requirements and regulations in order to achieve climate targets are inherently unpopular. If the US can now get back on track as a party to the Paris Agreement, it will be easier to explain the burdens on China as part of a globally coordinated division of responsibility. Furthermore, China's idea is that world trade should be more rules-based and the WTO must be strengthened to achieve this. The first step is to overcome the blockade of the dispute settlement mechanisms: Chinese experts are well aware that effective dispute settlement will also affect their own actions. But they would also like to be involved in the reformulation of rules. China also wants to strengthen

international cooperation in health policy and hopes for a material American contribution to the WHO.

Upon sober reassessment, in other areas the Trump administration was admittedly less harmful than one would expect. Confrontation began during the 2016 election campaign with an open challenge to China; it targeted the emerging world power and led to verbal escalation but in fact with quite unsuitable means, namely instruments of trade policy. The tariff increases have certainly harmed Chinese exporters, but no less than American consumers and agricultural producers. The 'great Phase 1 agreement' of January 2020, long negotiated with the declared aim of stopping the technological rise of China, ultimately focused on soybeans and frozen pork. China can live with this.

A Biden administration is not expected to change Washington's fundamental assessment of China. There may be a tougher stance on human rights issues in relation to regions that are understood to be domestically Chinese (Xinjiang, Hong Kong, Taiwan). They are even facing the prospect of a consistent policy being formulated – and then implemented – with the aim of containing China. In this context, it is particularly important to consider the value that will be placed on restricting high-tech transfers. Consequently, a higher degree of technological self-sufficiency will be pursued and interdependence will decrease.

Equally important is the question of whether the new administration will succeed in re-establishing stronger ties with its allies in the Atlantic and Pacific regions. In this respect, too, Trump was a gift for China – as illustrated, for example, by his immediate termination of the TPP negotiations.

For China's analysts, Trump was major league in barking and minor league in biting. They're working hard on the question of whether it could be the other way around with Biden.

Alexander Kallweit, FES Peking

Russia

The Kremlin's reaction to the US election has so far remained quite reserved. It is refraining from any congratulations until all legal uncertainties about the outcome of the election have been resolved. Behind this attitude is neither a focus on the rule of law nor support for the outgoing President Trump, but rather the message: 'This election leaves us cold.' The demonstrative indifference to the new man in the

White House is based on the perception that ultimately relations with Russia do not depend on who the American president is. Even Donald Trump, in whom hopes were initially placed and who would continue to be favoured by Russia's politicians and population at large, was no exception. Despite his warm words for his Russian counterpart, sanctions were expanded further, the INF Treaty was terminated and US withdrawal from the Treaty on Open Skies will proceed as planned. The well-known political scientist Ivan Timofeyev calls Russia and the threat it poses a kind of fetish on the part of the American elite that persists regardless of who is president.

Against this background, equanimity is understandable. Nevertheless, it is also understood in Moscow that relations might well deteriorate. During the election campaign, Biden described Russia as the greatest threat to US security. Russian experts expect that he could again coordinate more closely with the EU, consolidate NATO, and give the Ukrainian conflict higher priority on the agenda of bilateral relations. This is reason enough for Russia to look at the outcome of the US elections with little enthusiasm.

On the other hand, there is also hope for progress in arms control, such as an extension of the START III treaty, which Biden has already promised. There is also a desire to rebuild resilient communication channels. Even in the most difficult times of bilateral relations, there always existed direct exchange between representatives at all levels of both states in order to prevent escalations. Under Trump, these channels had almost completely disappeared thanks to the many personnel changes and a certain unpredictability on the part of the American administration. We can now hope that professional interlocutors will return, especially in the federal executive departments. Even if more geopolitical conflicts are expected from Biden, especially in post-Soviet space, he will at least be predictable. For Russian strategists, this represents an important advantage to the American change of government.

However, the elections were also of great interest for Russian domestic politics. There was intensive coverage of the riots, of the protective fences around the White House and the barricaded shops, as well as electoral fraud and technical difficulties. Such reports also make use of the frequently raised argument about double standards: How can the US criticise Russian elections when they themselves have such problems in their own democratic process?

Peer Teschendorf, FES Moskau

Great Britain

The soon-to-be-former President of the US had given Boris Johnson the honorary title 'Britain's Trump' and Joe Biden himself had described him as a 'physical and emotional clone of Trump'. At the same time, it was known that the president-elect, who is proud of his Irish origins, is rather sceptical of Brexit – the flagship policy of the British government.

For this reason, the election of Joe Biden as president is causing mixed feelings in London for the time being. Although Johnson was one of the first European heads of state to get a phone call from Biden, he was immediately reminded that Brexit should not endanger peace in Ireland. This increases the pressure on the government in London to give in to the Brexit agreement with the EU and if possible, to avoid an exit without an agreement. While Ireland until now has had support only from Brussels, in Biden it has now gained an ally in the White House. With Biden as president, Dublin is now also at the table in the much-vaunted Special Relationship between the UK and the US.

At the same time, however, this also opens up opportunities for Johnson. Under these circumstances, a concession on Brexit could be better justified in domestic terms and offer the opportunity to put UK-UK relations back on a substantial basis – which under Trump were good only on the surface or on Twitter. As host of the G7 summit and the follow-up COP26 climate conference in 2021, the UK is likely to play an important role in helping the US to revitalise multilateral mechanisms. The credibility of Biden's new climate policy could be underpinned by a successful COP26. The G7 summit, which Johnson wants to supplement with a meeting of the D10, the ten largest democracies in the world, could provide the opportunity to re-establish the US as a functioning part of multilateral institutions and thus also make way for the COP26. An image of the US as isolated as it was in 2018 is unlikely to occur under Joe Biden; instead, a photo of intense dialogues against the backdrop of a magnificent English castle could also polish up the battered image of London a bit.

But in addition to these short-term aspects, there are also long-term common interests. In the revitalisation of NATO, the maintenance of the close ties in the areas of military and intelligence and above all in the question of how to deal with Russia or Iran, the cooperation with a Biden administration should clearly be easier than with the erratic Trump. However, whether this can be done on the basis of traditional trust or on a more fragile foundation will be decided in the coming weeks in the case of Brexit.

Brazil

They seemed inseparable, united in their hatred of the press, globalisation and multilateralism – and the left. Both denied the dangers of Covid-19 and drove their countries to the highest case numbers worldwide. But while the virus probably cost Trump crucial votes for re-election, Bolsonaro is at peak popularity in the polls, largely supported by aid payments to the poor and a truce with conservative parties in Congress.

Like no other head of state, Jair Bolsonaro attached himself to Trump and adopted his style. Bolsonaro acts as a disruptive force on the international stage. Foreign Minister Ernesto Araújo proudly speaks of the fact that Brazil has now become a pariah. Whether it is about torpedoing agreements, regional relations, verbal attacks against China ('the China virus') or against international organisations like the WHO, Bolsonaro always knew Trump was on his side.

Now Bolsonaro is losing his closest ally. The most important pillar of his foreign policy is collapsing. And environmental policy is also likely to see some change. Domestically, Trump has always been a fixed point and role model for the ideological wing of the Bolsonaro government. Working with Biden, on the other hand, will demand compromises from the Brazilian government and potentially weaken the hardliners.

The Brazilian government will need to take a more pragmatic approach. After China, the US is its largest trading partner and under Bolsonaro Brazil has become even more closely tied to the US. Ultimately, economic dependence is likely to outweigh any resistance to Biden. Moreover, the pressure for pragmatism is also growing from within the country's own ranks, especially from the liberal economic wing and representatives of the military.

Environmental policy is likely to be the greatest potential source of conflict in relations with the US. Joe Biden and Kamala Harris have repeatedly emphasised how important environmental protection is to them. Biden spoke of possible sanctions if the destruction of the Amazon does not decrease. Critical calls from the EU are also growing louder to do more for environmental protection. At the verbal level, Bolsonaro will certainly not tolerate external interference, but in the end he will give in and make at least slight corrections. He will not be able to afford serious upheavals with the US, especially not if it matters also result in a dispute with the EU and China at the same time.

However, Bolsonaro will not simply give in verbally, as he needs his radical discourse to satisfy his followers. But still, the hard ideological wing in the government and around Bolsonaro's family clan is likely to lose power. Hardliners such as Foreign Minister Araújo or Environment Minister Salles are likely to be weakened further, while moderate actors in the government will gain influence.

The new US administration is also likely to be interested in a good working relationship in order to be able to counterbalance China in the region. It therefore remains to be seen how intensely Biden will actually emphasise his demand for more environmental protection. The new US president will not turn Bolsonaro into a multilateralist or an environmentalist, but may force his government to be more pragmatic.

Christoph Heuser, FES São Paulo
