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Recalibrating America's role in the world under a Biden presidency
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DOLLAR: Hi, I'm David Dollar, host of the Brookings trade podcast "[Dollar & Sense](#)." Today, we are going to talk about the outcome of the U.S. elections. I'm really thrilled to have as my guest Marvin Kalb, a legendary journalist whom we are fortunate to have here at Brookings as a nonresident senior fellow. We could spend the whole half hour going over Marvin's resume, so we won't do that. I will just say that his distinguished journalist career spans more than 30 years and includes award-winning reporting for both CBS and NBC News as chief diplomatic correspondent, Moscow bureau chief, and anchor of NBC's Meet the Press. So, I am really excited to have Marvin here.

Where we are as we speak [on Friday afternoon] is Joe Biden has leads in states that take him well past 270 electoral votes. He is likely to be the next president of the United States. He will probably have a Republican Senate, but that is not assured because there will be two Senate runoff races in Georgia. We are going to talk about the effect of these political developments on the United States, particularly on its role in the world, the international order, but let me just start by welcoming you, Marvin, and asking you for your basic reaction to this election.

KALB: I have to say, David, first of all, thank you very much for inviting me. And second, my reaction is one of sincere relief because on Tuesday night into Wednesday morning, when it was possible that President Trump could win reelection, I went into a deep funk. The reason is not so much that he is a Republican and he's opposed to a lot of the ideas about social responsibility that I hold, but rather the impact that he has already had on American society, which I think has been negative, and the impact that he has had on America's position around the world. The idea in my mind on Tuesday evening that he could win a second term and he could carry his ideas for another four years into the future led me to fear that as president he would be able to take the damage that he has already done to the American political system and worsen it to a point where there would be no recall and we'd be in a period of political authoritarianism that is simply frightening. So, when Wednesday morning led to Wednesday evening into Thursday and I could see that Biden had an opportunity in Pennsylvania, a very, very real one, and in Georgia to turn it around and to take in Pennsylvania, which had been the 600,000 vote lead that the president enjoyed. Well, that certainly led me to believe, and you David as well, that Biden is clearly going to be at some point even later today the president-elect of the United States of America. And that leaves me as I said in a state of relief.

DOLLAR: It is commonplace these days, Marvin, to say that the U.S. is more polarized than ever. Clearly this election revealed pretty severe polarization, but I look back on the Vietnam War era, Watergate, other times, and is really so different? Are we more polarized and are there any lessons from these earlier periods about how we might overcome the polarization?

KALB: David, that is a terribly important question and it leads me to try to think back to the Vietnam War years and to the Watergate years. I covered both of those stories. They left an impact on me as they did on anyone else who was part of it. It was a major— that period of the mid- to late-60s into the early-70s— that was a stunning period of decline, reexamination, concern. The idea that the United States of America could not beat a small country like North Vietnam. These led to very serious questions which we are grappling with even today. But in those days...there was a fundamental difference between then and now, at least as I see it. I could be wrong, but as I see it even during the worst days of the Vietnam War when there were clear differences between President Johnson's approach to the war and the dovish approach to the war that was led by Senator Fulbright of Arkansas, a Democrat, one of the things that we felt was that we had a political difference of profound importance, but we were all Americans all locked in to a

common hope that we could reconcile differences, be whole once again, and move forward. This was even true during the Nixon years when tens, maybe hundreds of thousands of people would gather right in front of the White House to express their displeasure with President Nixon and the way in which he was handling the Watergate crisis, the way in which he was handling the war in Vietnam. But we were all Americans linked together.

The difference now is that we are caught in a political war among ourselves. The polarization has reached a point where the word "war" is appropriate because it seems as if Republicans have— or at least the Trumpian Republicans— have their point of view about the future of this country and where we stand in the world, and they believe that the people who oppose them are their enemy. Not that they have a difference of opinion about how we deal with China or Russia. No, that their views are enemy views. They are antagonistic to the fundamental beliefs that we, Trumpian Republicans, hold. And that is stunningly different, in my opinion.

I hope that I am wrong, by the way, David. I hope that I have overstated the case. I hope that we are still capable of reconciling strong, polarized political positions. But at the moment, I'm not sure that we are, and I fear that the next two months, the period between the election of a new president and the inauguration of that president, will not be governed by efforts on both sides to cooperate and to make the new presidency succeed. I suspect that President Trump will use his dwindling power to make things as difficult as possible for the new administration setting up what may be at the back end of his mind now and that is a new run by Trump in 2024. So we may not be losing Trump just because he is defeated. This man is not going away into a corner seeking a new life as once again a television anchorman or something like that. No, he has tasted political power, he clearly enjoys it, and I think he wants to have more and more of it.

DOLLAR: My sense, Marvin, is that the U.S. is more effective in its foreign policy when we have bipartisan consensus. It seems like an obvious point, but I think there are a number of good examples. Dealing with the Soviet Union, for example, or opening up to China back in the 1970s. You might see some silver lining here with a Democratic president and a Republican Senate. Is there a possibility to get back to a bipartisan consensus on particular issues? I know Russia is something you followed for a long time [and you] lived in Moscow. Or on other issues, do you see the potential for more of a bipartisan approach?

KALB: David, I think it is absolutely possible and I certainly hope that that is going to be the case, but we cannot forget that Donald Trump and the last four years of American reality is not necessarily an aberration which when over we can simply throw out and resume our earlier lives. He represented important factors in American life and American politics that I suspect are going to continue. One of those factors was "the heck with the rest of the world, let's just do what is good for us." And he called that America first.

My belief is that Joe Biden, whom I have known for a very long period of time, is the sort of man who first and foremost wants to be friends with everybody. So it is not unimaginable, if it hasn't already happened, that he has picked up the phone and called Senator McConnell and said, "hey, Mitch, you and I worked together in the past. Let's do it again. I know you have a different approach to this and that, but let's try to work together." I think some of that may work. To the extent that it might, we may be able to have a coherent bipartisan foreign policy led by a president who doesn't like America first but America together with everybody else.

I wouldn't be surprised if in the first couple of months of the new Biden administration we see the American president traveling to Europe, meeting up with the leaders of Western Europe and the E.U., NATO, and expressing by his presence in Western Europe that the alliance between the United States and West European democracies remains paramount and central to this new president's thinking about the world. I have no inside information by the way just to quickly add that this is on his mind now, but knowing him I would not be at all surprised if that is on his mind and is something that he would like to do as quickly as possible.

DOLLAR: Marvin, you brought up the issue of how Trump has treated our allies and how a Biden administration is likely to be different. Let's go a little bit deeper into what the reaction around the world is likely to be. I know this is very speculative, but do you think the reaction is good: Trump is gone and that was an aberration. Or the fact that he's got about 70 million votes even in a losing cause, is that just really sobering to our different allies around the world?

KALB: I think very much the latter. If the loser in an American presidential campaign can gather 70 million votes, which happens to be more even than Barack Obama got in 2008, and I think at that time that was the very top of what presidential candidates had ever achieved. In other words, this goes back to an earlier point. [Trump] carries great influence with a sizable body of American society and those people believe that America first is the right idea. That it is the right way to proceed. The new president will be saying things radically differently. And around the world, my guess is that with West European democracies and with those countries around the world like India, most of South America, the Caribbean, Japan, those countries are going to be delighted to have a president who believes in a cooperative foreign policy. That the United States does not go it alone, but the United States adheres to its allied commitments. I think that Biden, as I indicated earlier, will be making every effort to make certain that the world sees it that way.

Now, how does China see it? I would ask you that question. I'm not sure. I have a feeling that they didn't like Trump because he was too erratic for them. Even the Russians, who obviously benefited from a Trump administration, even they from everything I have read yesterday and today coming in from Moscow...they probably are going to end up delighted with a Biden administration. Although he's going to be very tough with them, but they can live with that so long as they understand what it is that the president is doing. So long as the president does not surprise them. So long as the president lays out his vision. The Russians can adjust. They are very good at that, but they do not like to be surprised. I have a feeling Biden understands that and is going to talk to them tough but talk to them straight.

DOLLAR: I think that assessment fits very nicely for China as well, Marvin. I'll go into that in more detail in a future episode, but I think to some extent Trump was tough on China but not consistently. The main thing the Chinese feel is that he is erratic. They would hear one thing from him, different things from cabinet officials. So, I think they are looking forward to a more consistent policy. Probably not a friendly policy. I think Biden will go out of his way to be relatively tough on China, but the Chinese can live with that. They would prefer to have that consistent kind of policy and less destructive behavior than we have seen under President Trump.

KALB: Exactly.

DOLLAR: Marvin, I know one of your favorite themes is the role of the media. This is something you have studied and obviously you have been a part of. Of course, when we say media, I mean it is so complex in the U.S. I live in my own bubble. I have been following— you can guess what news

sources I'm following. Then there are other news sources that are more conservative, but I'm just wondering what your assessment is of the media's coverage of this election and how the media has performed?

KALB: David, I'm glad that you started to deconstruct the media so that we understand it a little better. There was a time when I first started in this business— but you know that was when Thomas Jefferson was president. When I first started, we were all one unit more or less. There were always people on the far-right and there were a couple of people on the far-left, but I would say that 80, 90 percent of the media was pretty much one world. We had a common vision. We could have differences, but we shared them and this, that, and the other.

Ever since the 1980s, 1990s especially, with the rise of cable news and the rise of right-wing radio commentary like Rush Limbaugh, for example. Ever since that time, the media has split. It is now in two worlds, and those worlds appear to be, like the political worlds in which they exist, they appeared to be at war with each other. On one side there is Fox and Breitbart and the Rush Limbaughs of the world and small networks that hook up into this universe of right-wing, far-right-wing conservative expressions. Quite often I make it a point of watching Fox News to see what it is that they are saying. And for the sake of total candor, I was for five years a commentator on Fox about eight or nine years ago. I used to be amazed at some of the things that they said. However, Fox is very interesting. Most of their very right-wing commentary is at night. During the day, they are more or less the same though they tilt to the right.

On the other side there is The New York Times, The Washington Post, the networks, cable news for the most part— not Fox. So you have these two worlds in conflict. I sometimes fear that so many people are watching Fox— it is the number one rated cable news operation in the United States and on any given night it attracts more viewers than even the big three networks. So they are a powerful journalistic and political force. And the necessity in my mind of linking journalistic and political will take you where I feel we are all going as a nation. That it is very difficult now to say "I read The New York Times and I know what's going on in the world" because you will then be ignoring those 70 million people who voted for Donald Trump. And they cannot be ignored if you want to understand our country.

So you have to study the media today in much the same way as we study economics or history or sociology. It is part of our lives. It has an enormous impact on the way in which we think about ourselves and our place in the rest of the world. I often fear that we are losing that battle. That we are having less of a grip on truth and reality. What is truth? I can give a person like Donald Trump my definition of truth, he will laugh and give me his, and it's two different universes. So how do we accommodate the new reality of that rising media power which is now not only journalistic but political?

DOLLAR: The last question I want to ask you, Marvin, is kind of a big picture question about Trump and now looks like a President Biden following him. What is the impact of this variation on the international order? That's a big phrase that we pundits like to use, so maybe we can break it down a little bit if you want. There's the security element of it: U.S. security alliances like NATO and in the Pacific. Then I'm particularly interested in the economic institutions: the World Trade Organization, International Monetary Fund, etc. So, are you in the school thinking that we are in an era of deglobalization and that Trump is really heralding a new era? Or do you think to some extent there was an aberration here and we can bounce back from that?

KALB: I certainly hope we could bounce back which is the way I would start to answer your question. I don't know enough about the economic side of life so I'm going to try as gracefully as possible to skip around that, but I do have some sense of the security side and the diplomatic side.

On the security side, the basic elements remain essentially the same. Russia is no longer a communist country, but it is an authoritarian and close to flat out dictatorship. China: dictatorship. And that to me is a bloody shame because I was one of those who believed 20, 30 years ago when Deng Xiaoping was in power in China that there would be economic liberalization to political liberalization, but it simply didn't happen. And Xi as the relatively new leader of China is a man who believes that he deserves to have all power. So China is a growing power, and the United States is going to have to deal with China in a realistic manner but also I pray in a manner that appreciates the history of China and how it sees its position in Asia and the world. If the United States considers China to be a kind of communist-era enemy, we are starting out in a dangerous place. We ought to recognize that China is an ancient civilization that did not emerge 250 years ago as we did. It has been around for a long time and it has certain visions of itself. Russia is similar in that respect. The United States, from a strategic point of view, is going to be confronting both Russia and China in much the same way that we had to confront Russia when it was the Soviet Union. I don't believe for an instant that the Russians are interested in going to war with the United States. They have an incredibly backward country. They want somehow or another to live better and not to go to war. But they have to get over the deep pit of authoritarianism in which they now find themselves.

The democratic societies, I think, are going to be delighted to find a president such as Biden picking up the loose pieces of the recent past and trying to recreate a democratic-led world where the United States plays— properly given its power— the leading role. Biden has talked in the past and some of his people have about pulling together a kind of democracy collaboration. I think that's going to be terribly hard to do, but he may decide to pull it off anyway because that would be a large statement of his intent about where he sees the United States in the future. Do I see an imminent war? I see lots of little imminent wars. But I have a feeling the people of China who run it, and the people who run Russia, and the new leadership in the United States will find ways of coexisting peacefully. As Nikita Khrushchev, one of the leaders of the Soviet Union, used to say in the 1950s: he used to say peaceful coexistence is essential because the living, he said, would envy the dead. What he meant by that is that anyone who lives in a civilized world with a civilized mentality will want to do everything in his or her power to avoid a nuclear war. And China has a lot of nuclear weapons, and Russia has a lot, and we have a lot. The problem for us during the communist era and now is to contain those weapons so they are never used.

DOLLAR: I agree with your instincts, Marvin. You know a lot more about Russia than I do, but what you were just saying about China sounds about right to me. They are not anxious to go to war, of course. Their people just want to improve their lives and send their kids to school and get ahead. But to bring us back to where we started, given that you've got these authoritarian countries with nuclear weapons as you say, it's going to take pretty clever diplomacy on the part of the United States to shape a policy toward both Russia and China that's both realistic, recognizes their authoritarian character. But my instinct is the same as yours: don't treat them as enemies. If we treat them as enemies then they are going to become enemies.

KALB: Exactly. And I certainly hope that Biden, who has the deep experience in foreign affairs, cares about that issue a great deal and emerges out of a view that the United States can protect its basic interests without being antagonistic to the rest of the world. We can, as a matter of fact,

lead in so many ways. It is very important that we seize this moment and lead the world in a better direction. And I think the world is ready for that kind of American leadership.

DOLLAR: That's a really good note to end on. I'm David Dollar and I've been talking to my colleague Marvin Kalb, the legendary journalist. We have been deconstructing the U.S. election and what are the potential implications for U.S. foreign policy and for the world. So, thank you very much for joining us, Marvin.

KALB: My pleasure.

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