Brookings Media Call: The Election of Joe Biden

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Anna Newby: Good morning, everyone. I'm just going to give it 30 seconds while folks connect in. Thank you so much for joining us today. We'll just get started in just a second.

All right. Good. Well, in the interest of time, since I know that it's a busy Monday morning for everyone, let's go ahead and get started. I'm going to kind of skip the pleasantries and go right to a couple of quick housekeeping items.

Thanks again to all of you for joining us. Definitely been a busy week. We are recording this call right now. We're of course on the record today. And to our reporter friends, we will be able to circulate a transcript sometime tomorrow. So please keep an eye out for that. We'll be able to send around a written transcript.

What we're going to do is just start with a couple of minutes of opening remarks from each of our Brookings experts on the line. And then turn to an open Q&A session. I think the best way for me to keep track of questions is if you can just pop a note into our chat off on the right-hand side, just stating that you have a question, I can call on you once we turn to that portion. So with that, let's go ahead and start off with David Dollar, if you can kick us off.

David Dollar: Good morning, great to talk to everyone. I'm going to focus on US-China relations and in particular, the economic relations, because my colleague Ryan Hass will be going broader on security and other issues.

I think the basic story is there'll be no dramatic change in US policy toward China, but there will be subtle and important differences. So let me make three points. First, the Biden Administration is clearly going to rejoin various international agreements: Paris Accord, World Health Organization, probably try to work out a new Iran deal. That will force the US to cooperate with China. We don't have to be friends. We don't have to agree on everything, but we're going to be working together on global issues. That's different and we'll probably stop the free fall in our relationship.

Second and more narrowly on the economic side, the Biden team has talked about working more closely with allies, and I think that'll be welcome from the European side, and it'd be welcomed from Asia Pacific allies like Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand. But very quickly we'll get into the practical issue of what does that mean to work together on China policy. And in my view, it really has to be in the context of international agreements. The Europeans will want the US to recommit to the World Trade Organization, get the dispute resolution mechanism working again. I think that's realistic.

In Asia Pacific, the Biden team has been careful to signal that they're not going to rush back into the Trans-Pacific partnership, but I think the first time President Biden goes to Asia, particularly to Japan, he's going to hear that the US is really missing in action as an economic force in the Asia Pacific. So there will be pressure from the region for the US to get involved and I wouldn't be surprised if two years or so into the administration, the US did rejoin the Trans-Pacific Partnership because that would be a way of working concretely with allies on new rules of the game.

And then the third point is that we have this very specific phase one trade deal between China and the US. Vice President-Elect Kamala Harris was criticizing that as recently as a few weeks ago. I don't think there's an appetite on the part of the Biden administration to ratchet up more tariffs. So we'll probably see some kind of a truce, but I don't see them rushing into reducing the tariffs or changing the US trade policy. The path of least resistance is just to let this phase one deal go on for a while. It's not working out very well, but it's not a high priority for the US to change that.

Again, somewhere around year two, you might get a shift away from these specific numerical targets to negotiating with the Chinese on particular trade measures. So I'll stop there and turn it over to Ryan Hass.

Anna Newby: Terrific. Thanks David. Ryan, over to you please.

Ryan Hass: Well, thank you. I will also talk about the US-China relationship and try to reinforce a few of the points that David was just making, because I think he hit the nail on the head.

I think that the main through line from Trump to Biden on China is going to be the competition will remain firmly at the center of how the US approaches its relationship with China. I think that we will see this play out on a variety of dimensions: technology, economic issues, military issues, governance issues, geopolitical issues, et cetera. And as David was suggesting, I think that we can safely forecast that the relationship will remain highly competitive at least through the first year of a Biden presidency.

And, I base this expectation on a few assumptions. The first is that there will be broad continuity in Chinese behavior which is increasingly repressive at home and assertive abroad. I think that the Biden administration will have a heavy focus on dealing with domestic challenges that they will be inheriting. There will be a continuing dynamic inside the United States politically, where there is little to gain and much to risk by being seen as protective of or soft on China. And, the natural prioritization as David was suggesting will be on strengthening relations with allies and partners. So this will be in part a sequencing issue of dealing first with allies and partners, and then getting to China a little bit later.

Even so, I do think that the manner by which the competition has carried out will have a few points of departure in a Biden administration from a Trump administration. I'll put four on the table here, and I welcome amendments from others in this group and certainly open to discussing them further.

The first point of departure is that there will be a real focus at the outset on shoring up America's sources of strength, its international leadership on climate, economic, and security issues, its alliance network and its domestic cohesion. And then re-engage in China from a position of greater strength later on.

I think that secondly, there will be a focus on aggregating the voices of America's allies to push back on problematic Chinese behavior rather than doing so unilaterally. David talked about how this will play out in trade issues. I expect it also will be replicated on human rights and other issues as well.

Thirdly, I think that there will be a real effort to restore values promotion to the center of American foreign policy under a Biden presidency. And this will manifest itself in a China context, probably through more pointed commentary on issues related to Xinjiang, Tibet, Hong Kong, and others.

And then fourth is, as David suggested, there will be an effort to preserve some space in this highly competitive relationship for cooperation with China on shared challenges, whether it's climates, COVID, possibly Iran, possibly North Korea. There will be a return to the view that it is possible to cooperate with competitors in instances when it serves our interests.

So, I think that America's overall posture toward China will look and sound a bit different, but the underlying competitive personality of the relationship will largely remain intact. Thank you.

Anna Newby: Great. Thanks Ryan. Next let's turn to the Middle East with Suzanne Maloney, please.

Suzanne Maloney: Thanks Anna and thanks to everyone on the call, especially my colleagues for taking the time to talk through what may happen in a Biden administration. Obviously I'm going to start with Iran. I'm going to try to be brief as my colleagues have been. The Trump administration walked away from the deal largely as a way to differentiate itself from its predecessor. And I think a Biden administration obviously is going to prioritize getting back to the nuclear deal as a symbol to the world that the United States is prepared to once again, re-engage in serious diplomacy to solve the world's toughest problems, and that the United States is prepared once again, to work with partners, even where there are differences on a range of other issues to try to solve those problems.

The challenge of course is going to be that Iran has a say in all of this, and while the Iranians want sanctions relief, they also want a number of other things from the United States in particular, which is to say that they believe that the United

States walked away from the deal illegitimately, and that there has been a consistent message in the Iranian diplomacy around what comes in 2021 that essentially is looking for some kind of compensation for the hundreds of billions of dollars that the Trump administration's maximum pressure strategy has cost the country.

My guess is what we're going to see is an early push around diplomacy and some efforts to try to get both sides back into greater compliance with their obligations under the nuclear deal, but not necessarily a full-footed jump back into the JCPOA entirely, because it is going to require serious concessions on both sides to in fact, create the conditions that would permit both sides to begin to re-honor their obligations under the deal. That will probably translate into something that looks like an interim nuclear deal. One much as we saw in 2013 at the start of serious negotiations between the Obama administration, the rest of the P5+1 and the Iranians. That would put the issue on ice, so to speak and enable the United States to try to rebuild a coalition of support for potentially strengthening the aspects of the deal that were of greatest criticism to its domestic critics at home.

Clearly, bipartisanship is going to be a struggle for the Biden administration, depending on what happens on January 5th, but obviously any kind of diplomacy with Iran that is grounded in at least some support from the Republican side of the House and Senate would strengthen its durability.

Let me just make one broader point on the rest of the region, which is to say that I think the Biden administration is going to have an opportunity and a challenge to really redefine the American approach to the Middle East. For much of the past 30 years, our presence in the Middle East has been in very much seen in military terms. Our support for our allies has been seen in military terms. That is not sustainable as I think we see from both sides of the aisle in terms of public support. And so the Biden administration is both going to have to deal with the new realities that have evolved over the course of the past four years where the United States has largely been missing in action, but also calibrates what's viable from the point of view of American public support.

And I think one of the key areas to watch obviously is going to be on Saudi Arabia, where I would expect the Biden administration to differentiate itself, both from President Trump, as well as from President Obama's approach. Look forward to talking more during the Q&A.

Anna Newby: Wonderful. Thank you, Suzanne. Very helpful. Next let's go to Michael O'Hanlon please.

Michael O'Hanlon: Greetings everyone. Good to see so many of you. I just want to talk briefly about the Pentagon and the defense budget. Interestingly, this could be an area of remarkably little divergence from Trump to Biden, although there is one bigger issue hanging over everything, which is of course the budget problems. So let me just say a couple of words about each of those points.

First of all, I think you all know that the national defense strategy, which was the signature accomplishment in policy and conceptual terms of the Trump Administration in regard to the Pentagon came out two years ago under Jim Mattis. Jim Mattis may not have been popular with Donald Trump when he left office, but he was popular with just about everybody else on both sides of the aisle, which means that there was a lot of credibility associated with that review. And it built on the Obama Administration's last two years with their so-called third offset. And they're beginning to focus on China and Russia much more than all post-Cold War defense policy and budget had done up until that point.

And therefore, we have a natural progression here, starting in around 2015, really right after the Russian seizure of Crimea and aggression in the Donbass, as well as the Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea and elsewhere. That has been very much grounded in both party's views. We all know that Michele Flournoy is considered a front runner for Secretary of Defense. She was part of the National Defense Strategy independent commission of 2018 that essentially validated Mattis's overall approach. But one thing that Michelle and all those commissioners did as well as General Dunford, when he was chairman, Secretary Mattis, Secretary Esper, they've all been saying that to implement this strategy correctly you need 3% to 5% real growth per year in the defense budget.

That is not going to happen. In fact, that was already not going to happen even before COVID and even before Biden's victory. The Trump budget of 2021, which was released last winter for the fiscal year that we've now just recently begun already projected essentially a flat defense budget over the next five years. And development since that time have only reinforced the argument for, I think that kind of relative austerity at the Pentagon.

And by the way, it's of course not even really austerity, it's a $740 billion a year national defense budget, which remains almost three times that of China, more than 10 times that of anybody else, depending on the exchange rate with Saudi Arabia, sometimes they're over 75 billion. But otherwise we are 10 times greater than anyone else, and most of the second-tier list of defense budget top spenders are American allies.

So when you look at it in those terms, it's hard to imagine a big political consensus in the United States forming for another big defense budget increase, absent some major shock to the system from Russia or China. In other words, the threat of war or possibly North Korea for that matter.

And so I think that what you're likely to see is that whoever is Secretary of Defense for President-Elect Biden, is going to have to figure out how to make some tough choices, because just to sort of tread water at the Pentagon, you do need budgets to grow faster than inflation, costs tend to go up faster than inflation. I'll finish on this point. You come back to your trade-off, your basic room for maneuver, your variables for adding or subtracting from the defense

budget include how fast you modernize the military. In other words, weaponry, procurement research and development, how ready you keep the force and how busy you keep the force, how well you take care of your people, and then how big the force is in terms of size and force structure.

And I would submit to you that even though big cuts in force structure are not feasible because they would actually reinforce the strain on the force and jeopardizes our deterrence of those very Russian and Chinese and North Korean and Middle Eastern threats that we're most worried about, that some degree of pruning within the force structure, and some degree of downsizing by, a couple army brigades here, a couple of air force squadrons there, even a couple of Navy shifts here and there, that's going to be I think, the most logical approach at the Pentagon to try to keep more or less the top priorities funded properly and more or less fully, even as the overall budget environment becomes much more austere than we're accustomed to.

Just bear in mind last point, the $740 billion a year national defense budget we have today is more than a hundred billion dollars greater than the latter Obama budgets. The latter Obama budgets were in the low 600 billion range. Trump definitely had to build up, but even he had essentially ended the buildup while he was still in his first term and his projections for the future envisioned no further buildup, and I think that's the new reality. Over.

Anna Newby: Thank you very much, Mike. Okay. Finally turning to Europe with Célia Belin, please.

Célia Belin: So, this election raised a lot of interest in Europe, very high-interest. I was amazed at the number of people who reached out following day after day, the results. And this is a reflection of the high anticipation of the potential reelection of President Trump that we all know that President Trump has really transformed transatlantic relations in convincing Europeans that trans-Atlantic relations will not necessarily be co-operative even when interests align.

And, as many said this morning and over the weekend after we learned that Joe Biden was considered projected president-elect, that it won't change the fact that Europe has changed its perspective on the US overall. And as the commissioner for internal markets said this morning, the era of European naivete is over, over the relationship with the US. It's a profound change from the way Obama was celebrated when he was first elected in 2008 and the enthusiasm that was perceived in Europe. And then you had a sort of first loss of naivete under the Obama administration with the realization that interest diverged very much in the Middle East in particular, but then a strengthening of this idea that interest will not necessarily align. And that as Angela Merkel said several times, you can't necessarily count on the US.

So I think starting from this standpoint, you will see Europeans still breathing a sigh of relief over the election of Joe Biden, just because it's a personality that

they know better. And that many of them know and like already, but also know probably how to expect that they will work with him and work with his teams.

There's a lot on the table. Macron tweeted this morning or yesterday, congratulation and that there's a lot to do to overcome today's challenges. It's the feeling, I guess coming from Europe, that there's going to be a lot of work to be done. And that's where Europeans are most happy, at least relieved with the results is that they potentially have the impression that you will have at least a dialogue and at least teamwork over some of these challenges versus just plain opposition.

Some of the topics that will be high up have been discussed already. It's multilateralism with the return to WHO, but also the Paris Climate Agreement. And potentially as Suzanne mentioned that conversation on the Iran nuclear deal as well.

But there's already a few areas where Europeans know that discussions will be more difficult. You have clearly and it's particularly true in France, sort of revived feeling of vulnerability to radical Islamic terrorism on the European continent. And the impression that American preoccupation are elsewhere.

Just recently, the FBI mentioned that number one threat priority is white supremacist. And obviously it's not the case in Europe yet, or at all hopefully, and so this divergence of maybe priority for internal threats might create some discussions down the line on how to handle both security at home, intelligence services, cooperation, but also corporation in the Middle East and North Africa.

Second point is Turkey, which has been a topic that has not been discussed enough and incorporated on enough, with a rise of tension over the summer, not only between Greece and Turkey, but also France and Turkey, and in general Turkey and the rest of European Union, and the question of Turkey in NATO is one of the hot topics that's going to have to be discussed.

Other topics include trade obviously and digital services. The European Commission will introduce the Digital Services Act, which plans to regulate several services, digital services not only in terms of taxation, but also regulating their use. And this is likely to increase friction on the two sides of the Atlantic. And yet it's one of the hot topic that needs to be addressed.

So the impression from Europe is that there has been a lot of lost time over the past few years, so there's a sort of willingness to just hit the ground running and just start cooperating back again. But, at the same time, over the past four years and a little bit longer than that, the interest might have been the diverging, so the bridge is actually longer to be crossed. I'll stop here for now.

Anna Newby: Perfect. Thanks very much Célia and to all of you. I'm going to start by inserting two questions that we received in advance over email. The first one is I think

probably best for Mike. And then the second one, I think maybe is best for either Ryan or David.

So Mike, this question comes from Paul Shinkman from US News and World Report. He asks, "Does Biden appear position to waste any opportunities created by the Trump administration in his desire to reverse or reset the current president's more troubling foreign policy moves? So for example, in reaffirming America's commitment to NATO, is there a risk that Biden would upset momentum towards other countries meeting the 2% GDP goal?" Let's stop there and then I'll turn to the China question after.

Michael O'Hanlon: Thank you, Anna and Paul. I think it's a great question. We know that 20 years ago when the George W. Bush administration came in, there was a famous line that their foreign policy was going to be "A, B, C, anything but Clinton." And that was an idea that somebody on the George W. Bush team put forth. It wasn't some outside commentator or pundit, and those were supposed to be the happy times in American politics before things got so poisonous. So there's always this temptation. But I think that in this particular case, there are a couple of places in particular where Biden needs to be careful, and I'm not so worried about NATO. I think that the increase in NATO spending really traces back to 2014 and the worsening behavior by Russia. If you look at the curves on NATO spending military budgets as the percentage GDP, they started to move upward in 2014.

So the real issue here for me would probably be Suzanne's question. I thought she gave a great answer on how to think about an Iran deal. I hope very much Biden doesn't just immediately go back to the exact terms of a deal that's due to start relaxing and gradually expiring two years after his inauguration already. I think whatever the merits of JCPOA, going back to its exact terms in 2021 would be questionable in wisdom.

The other place where I would be worried would be with North Korea policy. And Donald Trump has said, of course, that he wants to have this relationship with Kim Jong-Un. He's very proud of it. And Joe Biden said, no, we really shouldn't go to that extreme in spending time with dictators, but it was Barack Obama who said that we should be willing to reach out our hand to anyone who would unclench their fist and do advocate in interacting with so-called rogue states back when he was inaugurated 12 years ago. And, also, was Barrack Obama who conceded to president-elect Trump in November of 2016, when they met at the White House that Obama's own North Korea policy had failed.

In other words, to throw away Trump's initiatives and just go back to what Obama did is not so compelling either, and would seem to actually repudiate some of Obama's own interest or the Obama-Biden Administration's previous interest in reaching out to extremist regimes. So I think we should think about the terms of a deal that would be a more pragmatic way to get back on track in negotiations and basically in a nutshell, verifiably eliminate North Korea's nuclear production capability. Not the warheads that already exist, the ability to

make more warheads in exchange for a partial lifting of sanctions, and be willing to use some personal diplomacy with Kim Jong-un, at least to solidify and cement and finalize that kind of a deal, even if we don't start there. Thanks.

Anna Newby: Great. Thank you. I have one more question to relay which is on China, and then I will turn to Robbie Gramer from Foreign Policy, Daniel Franklin from The Economist and Nick Schifrin from PBS News Hour. So those will be coming after. This question is probably best for Ryan or David. And the question comes from Nike Ching from Voice of America. He's asking, "The United States is seen as decoupling from China. Do you think that this policy change represents a permanent and long-term movement in US decision-making or is it something that could be reversed or changed in the next administration?"

David Dollar: I don't really like the word decoupling because I don't think it's a very good description of what's actually happening. There's been very small decrease in trade between the US and China. And the whole point of the phase one deal is we're trying to increase trade and financial investment by Americans into China has gone up very significantly. So I don't think it's a good description of the overall economic relationship.

Clearly what's happened is the United States has gotten concerned about protecting a range of technologies. And so I think that is likely to continue and a Biden Administration will probably try to fine tune that and come up with effective sanctions and export controls and investment controls to really protect national security issues.

But on the other hand, I think we'll continue to see this trade and investment going back and forth between China and the US.

Anna Newby: Ryan, did you have anything to add on that or should we move on?

Ryan Hass: No, I guess I would just add that in recent years we've seen Chinese purchases of American products go down. We've seen Chinese investment in the United States go down. If the Biden foreign policy is premised upon the idea of strengthening the middle class, it's hard to see how these trends are conducive to Biden's overall agenda.

So, like David said, I expect that there will be a continued focus on protecting national security and national security supply chains. But I expect that it will be done in a much more targeted, concentrated fashion rather than sort of the scattershot approach of diplomacy by Twitter that we've witnessed over the past couple of years.

Anna Newby: Great. Thanks. Okay. Robbie, from Foreign Policy, let me turn the mic over to you.

Robbie Gramer: Thanks so much. Can you hear me? I had a practical question. Obviously, the president has not yet conceded and allowed the administrative processes to begin for formal transitions with landing teams of each agency. At what point does that become a major hurdle for Biden's foreign policy team and what type of policy impacts would it have on China, on Iran, et cetera, if there was not a traditional or routine transition process? Thanks.

Suzanne Maloney: I'm happy to start off with a quick answer, but then turn to my colleagues so I think we'll have more detailed answers. Obviously, this isn't entirely unprecedented in terms of timeline. It's unprecedented in terms of the president's behavior, but we've had now four years of that. We have the experience of Bush v. Gore, which deferred the start of a formal transition period until mid-December. And I think that gives us some confidence that the processes that are necessary can actually be undertaken successfully. We saw various successful transition at that period.

I'm less worried about that particular part of the puzzle. I think the challenge that we have is how do foreign actors respond to this opportunity that is left open by the president's direct and explicit delegitimization of the American democratic process. And do they seek to challenge and to create crises, which would then provide openings, and potentially with an administration without clear leadership at the moment, and in this transition period, I think we could see ourselves in for a very rocky period.

I don't count Iran high on the list to take advantage of this opportunity, because obviously they're looking to a transition that enables them to do business with the Biden Administration, but I could imagine other actors in other parts of the world as well as conceivably independent actors in the Middle East, looking to up the tempo right now and see what they can get away with.

Anna Newby: Did others want to comment on this question? What a prolonged transition will mean? Okay. I think that was a great answer. Let's move on. Sorry. Daniel Franklin from The Economist, you had a question on China over to you.

Daniel Franklin: Yes. I think actually for Ryan, I thank you very much for your very interesting comments. I had a question more on process rather than policy and whether you envision that there'll be a deepening of the kind of connection, strategic dialogue, the plumbing of the relationship, even if there's a lot of continuity in the competitive side of things. And if I may also question the follow-up question on Turkey, for Célia, it was very interesting that she highlighted that as a difficult area. But I'd be curious to know more about what she can discern of the Biden Administration's likely policy towards Turkey, is a thorny issue. But is there really a clear divide between the Biden administration's policy and likely policies of the other European allies for whom Turkey particularly France right now is a very difficult problem.

Ryan Hass: Well Daniel, thank you for your question. I'll try to be responsibly speculative because I honestly don't know the answer to your question. But, my expectation

is that not necessarily out of some naive hope of changing China's identification of its interests, but just sort of as a matter of fact practical matter, there will be a requirement for the United States to interact diplomatically with Chinese counterparts, much more frequently than has been the case over the past several years.

And if you look at the history of US-China relations, there is one common element to every issue that has been managed or solved, and that is that counterparts on each side have developed a relationship with each other and interacted frequently with each other to find areas where they had overlapping interests or could address problems of concern. Even in the Trump era, the one issue that was resolved or negotiated was the phase one trade deal. And that came about through a period of intensive interaction between Ambassador Lighthizer, Secretary Mnuchin and Vice Premier Liu He. So that trend of the US-China relationship has carried through the Trump Administration as well as everyone that preceded it.

And I think that if there is a desire to solve problems or advance interests with the Chinese, which I expect there will be, there will just fundamentally be a requirement to engage on a higher tempo than has been the case recently.

Célia Belin: On Turkey, I do not have much of an answer on whether you have right now in the Biden team or much less in the transition team someone that would be specifically in charge of Turkey. We know that a lot of European experts have joined the team that is extensive. And so we know of many people, including colleagues that might be able to contribute on a difficult topic.

The thing is, I don't think the administration, the future administration or the team coming in place is set on the direction it wants to take. It's very much of a developing issue and with very contrary interest at the moment. So one of the interest is of course, stability, both stability of the European Union and of NATO at a moment where the Biden Administration will try and repair relationship and obviously invest in allies, that is, not only try to mitigate maybe the disappointment of Middle East and allies over his own election, and also use the enthusiasm of European allies at the same time, but he will have a specific issue to deal with Turkey in the sense that you have within this team, people pushing for a sort of a democracy agenda. So basically pushing for the idea that closest allies, including NATO allies should be fully democratic.

There has been a tendency from the Trump Administration to be a little bit too friendly to authoritarian leaders. And that it should be reasserted that democratic allies are the strongest allies. That is one of the tendency within the team that's coming in, but it's not necessarily yet a majority idea. Even though present-elect Biden himself has written in Foreign Affairs earlier this year that he will push for a democracy summit and that he will put democracy at the heart of the agenda, it might be a little bit more restrained, because the Turkey issue also deals with relationship with Germany, relationship with Russia, the refugee issues, stability of Syria. I think it's a huge conundrum. I can only give

you feedback from Europe that basically said this is at the moment, one of the most pressing geopolitical issues in the area. And that so far, there's been very little ability to engage the US on this topic, even though it's weighing very heavily on many European shoulders.

At least it could just start with a common assessment of the situation before going into a specific decision. But others here, Suzanne, Mike, I don't know if you have other clues on what would be a Turkey agenda for the new team.

Anna Newby: Did either of you want to weigh in on that last question about Turkey? We can keep moving. Okay. So next, I'm going to turn the mic over to Nick Shifrin from News Hour. And after that, I have Howard LaFranchi, from Christian Science Monitor on my list. If you'd like me to add you to my list, please just put a quick note in either the public chat or send one to me directly, and I'll make sure that we get to you. So Nick, let me turn the microphone over to you.

Nick Shifrin: Thanks very much and good to see you all. Ryan, if I could start with you, I'm intrigued by the idea of a Biden Administration taking a few steps first. I think you listed rebuilding alliances, dealing with climate, dealing with domestic cohesion, and then dealing with China. If that's the case, is there concern from your end that China could just simply accelerate some of the trends that it's already doing, whether propaganda, South China Sea et cetera, Belt and Road around the world and the US could essentially fall behind a little bit more in that interim period?

And Suzanne, if I could just quickly ask you what you think MBS's response will be when he gets a pretty cold call from the President-elect and when the Iran diplomacy starts? Thanks.

Ryan: Nick, thank you for the question. I will offer a quick response, but I will phone my friends, David and Michael and others, if they want to add or amend to what I'm about to say.

I think that just as a practical matter, if the Biden Administration says that it prioritizes strengthening coordination with allies to deal with China, then that's what it needs to do. It needs to operate with a certain degree of sequencing and prioritization. And it needs to have real conversations where it doesn't show up in foreign capitals saying, this is the plan, this is what we're going to do, but has an interactive discussion with key partners in Asia, in Europe to ascertain where there are areas of converging interest in space for coordinated efforts to deal with China.

And that will just as a practical matter, take a period of time. I'm not trying to suggest that a Biden Administration would ignore China or be closed to direct interaction with China. But what I am trying to say is that there will be, I think, a concerted effort to sequence these actions to reflect the rhetoric that has been used up to this point by the president-elect.

On that note, I don't think that there should be expectations for near term or immediate interaction at the presidential level between President Biden and President Xi. They'll get to that when they get to it. But it will, I expect be after a series of interactions with allies and partners around the world.

Michael O'Hanlon: I could add one point perhaps after David, go ahead, David.

David Dollar: Well, I was just going to add that, some of these Chinese activities are not working out particularly well for China. The Belt and Road is running into a lot of trouble because of the pandemic and recession all around the world. You're going to have a lot of flying countries of China with debt problems. They've alienated their neighbors in the South China Sea. So I don't see China rushing ahead getting advantage with these various actions. And I think the US can afford to build up its alliances and take a more cautious response.

Michael O'Hanlon: The only point I wanted to address is very specific and it's the threat of war between the United States and China, which of course is not as likely as needing to deal with all the other dimensions of the relationship that David and Ryan have been focused on primarily so far, but, it would be far and away the most concerning I would argue. It's really the only thing that scares me about dealing with China. Other things may be complicated, difficult, problematic in one way or another, but I'm probably most worried about the possibility of a fight over Taiwan.

And I do think there is a dimension of American strategic thinking right now, which is potentially wrongheaded and may be even dangerous, which builds on what I said earlier about the national defense strategy. I said earlier, the national defense strategy is very popular, but I'm not sure it's 100% correct, because it's strong implication is that if we do reinvest in many of the areas of defense innovation, modernization, procurement and so forth, that we should be able to re-establish some degree of military dominance over China and Russia of a type that we used to have 10 and 20 years ago.

I think that's wrong as an assumption. It's actually dangerous because if we think that we can win a fight against China in the Western Pacific, almost within eyesight of the Chinese mainland in the future, the way that we could have 30 or 40 years ago, I think we have failed to understand trends in defense technology, obviously trends in China's military budget and realities that just aren't going to go away even if we improve our own game a little bit.

The place where this comes to a head most is the Taiwan issue because that's of course the issue where we know China would be most willing to fight if things really headed in a bad direction. So I'm interested in us working with our allies to develop various kinds of potential responses to a Taiwan crisis that do not require the United States to come to the direct immediate defense of Taiwan in an all-out fight, but allow us to use our military and economic power in other theaters, perhaps more in the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean, for example, with the military and in other realms using economic sanctions that are applied

multilaterally to punish China severely for any kind of blockade or other kind of use of force that it might consider against Taiwan.

So that's where the ally dimension comes in for me most importantly, is thinking through Taiwan contingencies, and signaling to Beijing that if China does threaten or use force against Taiwan, that we're going to have a lot of allies who may or may not be able to help with a direct fight in defense of Taiwan, but who can help us in a more multi-dimensional punitive response that will not be something China can easily escape. Obviously I hope it doesn't come to that. I'm not suggesting this should be the most prominent thing in our public diplomacy with China, but I think it has to be a central element of our own strategy. Thanks.

Suzanne Maloney: Nick, I'll speak really quickly to the Saudi question. I think the Saudis are well aware that it's going to be a change to have President Biden in place. I think that helps to explain why they were kind of late to the party in terms of their congratulations this weekend. It was noticeable particularly as the rest of the leadership around the Middle East offered statements in support of the transition, but we didn't hear from the Saudis until almost the end of the line.

Whether MBS is really prepared to take on a fight with the United States, I think is fundamentally unclear. Biden has said that he would end US support to the war in Yemen and I think there's a lot of support on Capitol Hill for such a policy, it's the right thing to do. In many ways I think Saudi Arabia and the broader approach to the Gulf is going to be the real test of what a new American approach to the Middle East would look like.

Most people are looking at Iran at the JCPOA. That's the signal to great powers, and it's an investment in the non-proliferation regime, which is absolutely fundamental to American security. But how we approach Saudi Arabia, a partner for more than a century, which has been vital in a number of key issues, whose role in oil markets is central to global economic stability is going to be really important because it's going to demonstrate whether President Biden can A, differentiate himself from the Obama Administration, and B really apply tough talk to allies and partners where there are divergences while not disrupting diplomacy on shared interests. This is an area where we just haven't had a lot of nuance in terms of the historical American approach to the Middle East. You're either with us, or you're against us.

With the Saudis there are key issues on which we need their support engagement, but there are also important divergences that the United States has really failed to put pressure on the Saudis in the past around, and I hope that the Biden Administration will take a more strenuous approach.

Anna Newby: Thank you. We are going to try to squeeze in two or three more questions, and I know that Ryan is going to have to jump off in a second. And so if folks have questions for him after he leaves, I'll just do my best to connect people by email if possible.

Let me kick things over to Howard LaFranchi from CS Monitor. You're still on mute, Howard.

Howard LaFranchi: Okay, Am I good?

Anna Newby: Yeah.

Howard LaFranchi: Sorry. So my question has to do with Biden's proposal for a summit of democracies. And I know Celia started answering this, but clearly, Biden is going to be very busy in the first months and year of his presidency. So he's not doing this just as a kind of a feel good little gesture. What do you see as the point of this and how might he use it to differentiate his foreign policy from what he pursued while he was vice-president under President Obama?

Célia Belin: Should I go ahead? Yeah? Okay. I think this has rescinded a little bit in terms of priority, the summit of democracies in my opinion as we could see of late from the Biden team, what we heard from them. There's a practical element that is a little bit difficult in particular with strengthening alliances across the globe, you have a lot of alliances and partners that have not been the most democratic in the past few years. The idea would be, I think, more modest than that, would be to just prioritize the ideas and input of democracies over the ones of authoritarian partners rather than the opposite, which has been the case under the Trump Administration. So it's just a matter of focus.

I think the idea of a summit of democracy is still out there, but you will see also the impulse to maybe work on climate first rather than work on a democracy as a concept without any practical implication. And so it is being discussed at the moment.

The least I can say is that on the European perspective, it's not perceived as well as one could imagine. There's always a sort of skepticism over the fact that the US tends to confuse the nature of a regime with its behavior. So it's not because the US is a great democracy, it's just been proven again that it's behaving in a co-operative multilateral way on the world stage. So I think there's a lot of repairing to be done in showing that you can cooperate with your allies, that you can tackle together global challenges such as in particular, the pandemic first and foremost, second, climate, but also a trade imbalances and other types of, or digital services questions, things that really need a strong cooperation.

And so there's so sort of a skepticism over the idea of just pushing democracy for the sake of it, and not necessarily pushing the idea of democracy as a guarantee of good cooperative behavior, which would be the favor I think from a European perspective.

I know it's still out there as an agenda to differentiate between strong authoritarian states, such as Russia and China, and a sort of Alliance of

democracies, but that will be more strengthened around a common agenda, I think.

Michael O'Hanlon: If I could just add briefly, I don't disagree at all with Célia, but I still think it's a fine idea if expectations are modest, and if it's essentially a one-off. I mean, Howard, to build on your point that Biden's going to be busy, well, he's going to be busy so this is actually a nice excuse for a lot of people that come and say hi to him in his first year as president, without having to schedule a separate state visits, without having to do a whole lot of extra work, without waiting for a September UN meeting that may or may not be dedicated to this kind of a thematic purpose.

Also, with defense policy and national security concerns, focusing more centrally on Russia and China, it's just another symbolic way to reinforce that argument. If you were focused on the Middle East going back to some of Suzanne's points, you don't really have the luxury of dealing with an Iran nuclear threat or an ISIS or Al-Qaeda just with fellow democracies. Even if you count Jordan as a democracy you don't have that many in the region that are going to work with you. But, if you're dealing with Russia and China, most of the key parties along the periphery of each are democracies. And so it's a useful forum. Not the complete answer, but for dealing with those two concerns, it's a useful additional forum, allows you to prioritize the voices let's say of South Korea, some countries like that that may or may not make it into a G7 or a UN Security Council kind of meeting.

And so, I think if expectations are modest, it's just a useful way to signal Biden Administration's commitment to democracy. But I sort of put it in the category, it's sort of a little bit apples and oranges, but Obama's Cairo speech where it's a nice way to send a message, but it doesn't necessarily have any legs, unless as Célia says, it's backed up by an enduring agenda that lends itself to ongoing work and collaboration.

Célia Belin: If I may just add one sentence. Mike, I appreciate what you're saying. I can only hear already the criticism just from one fact. This is a very difficult transition, this takes time and there's a debate over the legitimacy of this election coming from the Republican camp, and it takes time, it would be even more difficult to have a summit where the US gets to a point, what is a democracy, what is not a democracy?

The fact of inviting this country and not that other particular country and saying basically, you are considered a democracy worth inviting, you are not, is a highly risky endeavor for which if there's no clear outputs, I don't see why you would go to that length.

I hear already the French criticizing this type of initiative, maybe that's unfair, but I think it would serve very well the Biden Administration to approach very pragmatically and humbly a lot of these issues just for the fact that I think we're not at the stage where the US can claim supremacy on the democracy issue.

Michael O'Hanlon: Well, right, but I don't want to have a debate, but in a whole week or in a week or two, this could look completely different if by then Trump has conceded. And most Republicans are not really defending Trump's gymnastics on this question. What he's doing now is playing out a court process that actually is legitimate and is consistent with democracy, even though his rhetoric is horrible and is not consistent with democracy. All I'm trying to say is because he sets the tone and he hasn't conceded, and his rhetoric has been bad this Monday, November 9th feels a certain way, and it's not very good. I take your point, but by November 20th or certainly January 20th, we could be in a whole different world in terms of the health of American democracy and the fact that American institutions may have survived this test from a guy that many of us feel really never should have been present in the first place because of his disdain for many of our democratic norms. And yet the democracy hopefully will have endured that. And that could be a powerful testament to the strength of American democracy.

All I'm saying is we don't really know how this issue is going to look in a week or a month or a couple of months.

Anna Newby: Thank you. I'm going to try to squeeze in one final question, and then I think I'm going to have to connect some people by email. We, unfortunately weren't able to get to. Ishaan Tharoor from the Washington Post, if you can please jump in.

Ishaan Tharoor: Hi there. Thank you all, and I'll be really quick. I really appreciate all this. Quick question for Célia, could you just talk briefly about the impact Trump's defeat may have, or may not have on the evolving political conversation within Europe? Does it take the wind out of the sails of people like Orbán or the governments in Poland. What kind of broader impact is there going to be politically there?

Célia Belin: So very quickly to Mike's point, I think the narrative is being written right now, so whatever we feel right now has Mike exactly said, could feel very differently in a few weeks in one direction or the other. As I said, Europeans are looking at this election extremely closely in particular because it deals with their own politics and reflects on their own nationalist movements.

You could see on European Twitter sphere this weekend, but also in political conversation on TV or other places that you already have an impact of a substrate of the population that is considering that Biden stole the election, and all the conspiracy theories that are emanating from this side of the Atlantic are also working quite well on the other side. And there's a sense because to take France, for example, because many nationalists never arrived to full power in France, they have a sense of victim hood that they sort of reflected in the plight of Donald Trump at the moment.

So you will see a strengthening of this idea depending on how this goes here. These politics are very reflective from one another. What we could see as we discussed earlier, this election was not a full rejection of Trumpism. It shows that these movements, nationalist, populist movement have strength. It's the

same in Europe. At the same time that you can have a coalition of Americans and potentially Europeans that really push back on this. So this is the structuration of the political evolution right now, and it reflects back on Europe very strongly with new election that are going to be coming up in the next two years.

Anna Newby: Right on time. It is 11:30, and we need to call it there. Thanks so much to all of you for taking a chunk of your Monday morning to do this. I think it was really informative.

Like I mentioned, we will be circulating a transcript of this conversation sometime tomorrow, so please keep an eye out for that. I think most of how to reach me directly, but just quickly, my email address is anewby@brookings.edu. If you just need to pop me a note and I can connect you one off with one of our experts.

So thanks again and have a good rest of your day.

Michael O'Hanlon: Thank you.

Anna Newby: Thanks folks.

David Dollar: Thanks Anna.

Michael O'Hanlon: Thanks everybody [crosstalk 01:06:15]-

Suzanne Maloney: Thanks all.