



Biden's Foreign Policy 'Reset': New US Perspectives on Central Asia and the South Caucasus

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Introduction

This discussion paper focuses on President Joe Biden's potential stance towards the South Caucasus and Central Asia. Amongst a host of uncertainties, what is clear is that the Biden administration will seek to overturn Trump-era policies, which arguably damaged relations with some of its historic allies. In contrast to Trump, Biden stands out as a president with personal knowledge of and experience in both the South Caucasus and Central Asia.

The paper will focus on the potential policy shifts under the Biden administration that will impact the regions of focus. Washington will have the chance to re-engage with its regional ally Georgia and con-

tinue its efforts to both develop bilateral relations and bring the state into the Western sphere. On the other hand, the relative US absence from the 2020 Karabakh War arguably weakened its hand in the South Caucasus. Furthermore, the US stance on the Karabakh War created mistrust in both Baku and Yerevan towards Washington. It will take significant effort to restore a semblance of balance against Russia and further develop ties through economic and diplomatic cooperation with the region. Regarding Central Asia, the new American strategy in the region is discussed while emphasising the importance of countries such as Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. In this case, security concerns regarding Afghanistan will also play a major role in re-establishing American influence in the region.



In his address to the Virtual Munich Security Conference 2021, US President Joe Biden said that: 'I'm sending a clear message to the world: America is back. The transatlantic alliance is back. And we are not looking backward; we are looking forward, together.'
(Timm Schamberger / Anadolu Agency)

Shifts in US Foreign Policy under Biden

The South Caucasus and Central Asia have never been top US foreign policy priorities. Despite significant foreign policy differences, the last three US administrations have all regarded the region as either a type of 'no man's land' or as 'Russia's backyard'.

For its part, the Biden administration is set to pursue a different course than his predecessor in both domestic and foreign policy. Washington will need to consider new geopolitical realities in Eurasia and try to reconstruct the balance of power. While the US has always needed to consider the Russian factor in the South Caucasus and Central Asia, China has also become a major player. Therefore, no major shift from the 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS) and the 2018 National Defence Strategy (NDS) is expected. As stated in both documents, Russia, Iran and China will be the key countries of focus for US foreign policy. The Biden administration is more likely to strengthen the position of its allies, endorse military alliances, and promote traditional trade partnerships that facilitate America's place in the world, all of which were heavily undermined during the Trump era. This policy shift may bolster the importance of NATO and Allied military command in Europe and the Asia-Pacific. Given this, the former 'no man's land' of the South Caucasus and Central Asia may become another zone of great power competition.

In his latest speech at the Munich Security Conference, Biden stated that "America is back" and ready to confront the attempts of Russian President Vladimir Putin to weaken the European project and NATO alliance (The White House, 2021). This could entail the NATO alliance playing a strong deterrent role against Russia once again. The South Caucasus may also become a new 'battleground' in this renewed competition. The region will hold great-

er importance following the peace in Karabakh since the presence of Russian peacekeeping forces on Azerbaijani territory means that Moscow is present on the ground in all South Caucasus countries. This situation has the potential to become an interesting case study in the Biden administration's stance towards Russia. Biden has outlined the necessity of keeping NATO's capability at a high level while also standing against corruption, cyber-attacks and fake news to "counter Russian aggression" (Biden, 2020). It is also clear that Biden will put more weight on transatlantic cooperation than his predecessor.

The Biden administration's effort to restore America's place in the world will undoubtedly see renewed US engagement on several fronts that were neglected by the Trump administration. However, military withdrawals from countries such as Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia and Syria that started in the Obama era and actively continued during Donald Trump's presidency may continue, thereby increasing the scepticism of some of America's traditional allies in the region. On the other hand, in contrast to the Trump administration's "America First" policy, Biden's vision is largely based on regaining and uniting its allies, particularly those the US considers to be democracies. The major challenge for the Biden administration will be standing against growing Chinese power that directly affects the Central Asian region and indirectly influences Russian decisions regarding the Western alliance. Under the Biden administration, US policy on the South Caucasus and Central Asia will be simultaneously shaped by developments in US-China and US-Russia relations. However, there have been important developments in the region since the last Democratic administration, and Biden has already begun to take measures to face these new realities.

The South Caucasus

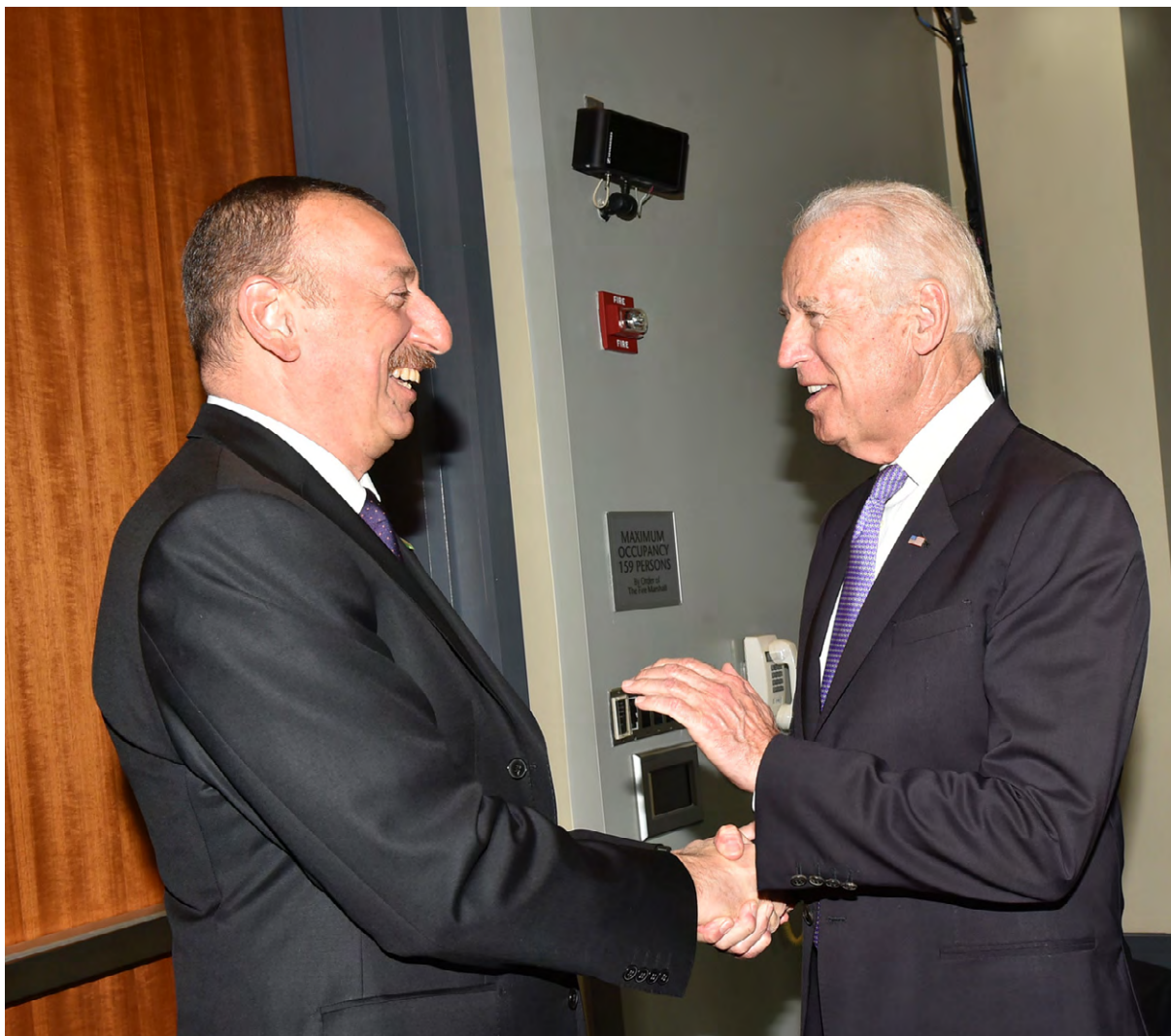
Despite continuing problems in the region, such as the ongoing Russian occupation in Georgia and the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, the South Caucasus have historically failed to secure a place as a priority for US foreign policy. Various administrations have supported democratisation efforts in the region while backing major energy projects, however, they did not back up strong rhetoric with concrete actions, namely showing a clear stance against occupations in South Caucasus. However, new geopolitical realities, including increased Russian military presence in Karabakh along with new prospects for energy and trade cooperation, may peak American interests.

President Biden is familiar with important political developments in the former Soviet Union since the 1970s. During his time in the Senate and while serving as Vice-President, Biden was one of the most important figures for US foreign policy, especially regarding Russia and its neighbours. Biden's past firm stance against Russian aggression was notable and unchanging; Biden became a champion for countries that suffered from Russian aggression, including Georgia and Ukraine.

Since the 1990s, US interests in the South Caucasus have mainly been based on energy security and stability. During the early 2000s, the Bush administration developed special relations with Georgia after its "coloured revolution" (CNN, 2005). However, this support and further promise of closer cooperation with NATO and the EU did not materialise during the 2008 Russian-Georgian war.

Georgia still maintains its geopolitical importance in the South Gas Corridor project. However, some problems have arisen in recent years with other major projects, particularly with regards to the Anaklia port project, which failed to achieve its predicted value (Daly, 2020). The development of the Georgian-US joint venture was opposed by Russian interest groups in Georgia that objected to the creation of a port large enough to host NATO or US navy vessels. Furthermore, Georgia continued to be an important transit hub for both Belt and Road-related projects and Western commercial interests (Topuria, 2019). This value was largely due to Armenia's isolation in the region and the Karabakh conflict. However, following the armistice signed between Azerbaijan, Armenia and Russia last November, a new transit corridor will be created between Turkey and Azerbaijan via Nakhichevan, representing a viable and valuable alternative to the Georgian route. This new corridor may undermine the current profile of Georgia as an important long-term transit partner and potentially offers an alternative for the delivery of Turkmen gas to Europe. Nevertheless, this ultimately depends on achieving a final peace agreement in Karabakh and greater regional economic cooperation that also includes Armenia. The Biden administration will have a responsibility to keep Georgia as a priority in their South Caucasus policy in order to defend Georgian economic interests, the country's importance in European energy security and its democratic development (Avdaliani, 2020).





In 2016, Joe Biden said the US attached great importance to meetings with President Ilham Aliyev, adding that these meetings contribute to expanding Azerbaijan-US cooperation and elevating relations to a new level. (Azerbaijan Presidency)

In his 2009 visit to Georgia, then Vice President Biden described the country as an inspiration (Kucera, 2021). The country's warm welcome of the now-president was not coincidental: Biden was a driving force behind the multi-billion-dollar aid to Georgia delivered right after the war in 2008. However, Obama's underwhelming response to Russian aggression forced Biden to also step back, a move that was not forgotten by many pro-Western Georgians. Currently, Georgia's profile is different than it was a decade ago given that many pro-Moscow elements have since infiltrated Georgian politics. The pro-Western current slowed after the former president and leader of the Georgian dem-

ocratic revolution, Mikhail Saakashvili, was exiled and the country fell under the de-facto control of businessman Bidzina Ivanishvili who has close ties with Russia.¹ Despite preserving a pro-Western path for Georgia, Ivanishvili's Georgian Dream has failed to create stronger bonds with the US compared to Saakashvili. Biden is expected to support the pro-Western path of Georgia as well as promoting free trade in order to protect the country from sliding away from the West. However, Georgia's importance in US foreign policy will largely depend on Biden's approach towards Russia.

¹ For further details on the modern Georgian politics and the background of Saakashvili-Ivanishvili rivalry, see Gafarli, Turan, *The 2020 Georgian Parliamentary Elections*, TRT World Research Centre, 28 October 2020. It can be accessed at: <https://researchcentre.trtworld.com/publications/info-packs/the-2020-georgian-parliamentary-elections>

The US arguably missed a historic opportunity in the most recent conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Washington was slow to react when the 2020 Karabakh War broke out last September. This was largely due to the ongoing US presidential race, as well as the Covid-19 pandemic. Under these circumstances, foreign policy, especially regarding non-priority regions for the US, was deemed secondary. A US-brokered ceasefire failed just hours after its implementation and the Trump administration failed to put forth a coordinated response to the issue. The Biden campaign issued a detailed statement that was criticised by both Armenia and Azerbaijan for not supporting their respective positions. The US failed to adequately support mediation efforts through the OSCE Minsk Group, ultimately leading to a Russian-brokered ceasefire.

Both Armenia and Azerbaijan have historically favoured US involvement as they see the US as a deterrent against potential overstepping from Moscow. The latest clashes and armistice in Karabakh demonstrated that Moscow still stands as the most powerful regional actor. Traditionally, the OSCE Minsk Group, co-chaired by France, the US and Russia, was the main tool used by Washington to balance Moscow in the South Caucasus. However, given the US' relative absence during the most recent conflict, it was the Turkish intervention that ultimately prevented Russia from becoming the sole determiner of the conflict's fate. As it stands, Azerbaijan has a dilemma regarding the new US administration. Baku believes that the Democrats have historically strong ties to the Armenian lobby in the US and will not change the US' stance towards the region, particularly given that it had withdrawn from an active presence in the South Caucasus even prior to the Trump administration. However, Biden's stated desire to confront Moscow gives hope to regional states that they will receive greater attention from Washington. Furthermore, the US-Turkey relationship under the Biden administration will require a closer focus as Ankara is also a significant presence in the region. Joe Biden openly criticised the Turkish government prior to his election as President and his Secretary of State Anthony Blinken is known for his anti-Turkish stance on issues such as Syria and the East Mediterranean. It remains to be seen whether new strategic realities in the region will lead to a new chapter in Turkish-American relations, particularly because the Turkish presence in the region offers a counter-balance to Russia. International cooperation and Western investment will also be vital in rebuilding the war-torn infrastructure of Karabakh. This creates an opportunity for US companies, which can further boost the US commercial interests in the region.

On the Armenian side, experts believe that the state is now more dependent on Russia since Russian peace-keeping forces in Karabakh are largely responsible for the fate of Armenians in the region (Poghosyan, 2021). Armenia is strategically linked to Moscow, which decreases its chance of finding an alternative in Washington. Furthermore, Azerbaijan gained an upper hand in both Moscow and internationally after its military victory in Karabakh, which further disadvantages the Armenian position. The Armenian prime minister is also struggling against domestic opposition and anger from the diaspora because of the defeat. In the current situation, Armenia should hope for greater regional economic cooperation, which may bring the country out of its current isolation. In any case, any cooperation in the region will include Russia, a reality that may draw Biden's attention in order to offer a counterbalance to Moscow.

Some specific appointments in the Biden-Harris administration may be indicative of Washington's plans for the region. Nancy McEldowney, who used to work at the US diplomatic missions to Baku and Ankara, has been appointed as national security adviser for Vice President Kamala Harris. During her time in Baku, the US waived Section 907 of the Freedom Support Act². There is also a reasonable hope for the US and Iran to restore the 2015 JCPOA nuclear deal. This policy aim may increase the significance of the region, particularly given the South Caucasus geographic proximity and political and social ties with Iran. The nomination of Wendy Sherman, former chief negotiator for the 2015 nuclear deal, for the US Deputy Secretary of State position further strengthens the possibility of renewed engagement with Iran. Sherman was the undersecretary for Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and known as one of the architects of the P5+1 negotiation. Furthermore, Israel's strong support of Azerbaijan during the recent conflict creates another point of influence over Biden's possible plans for the region. Biden and Israeli PM Netanyahu agreed on strengthening cooperation on defence to overcome regional security issues, namely Iran (Leonard, 2021). Thus, Israel-Azerbaijan military cooperation can be a useful tool in Washington's hands that may be used against "regional security threats". Amongst a host of factors, the Biden administration will need to consider the prominent roles of both Turkey and Israel while building its rapprochement with the regional countries.

² Section 907 of the US Freedom Support Act prohibits any direct aid from Washington to Baku which makes Azerbaijan the only post-Soviet country to face such a ban. However, the US government tried to keep Azerbaijan close after the 9/11 attacks. Therefore, the Senate adopted the amendment to the Section which provided the President with the ability to waive the ban for a year. Although the amendment waiver has been used each subsequent year, the US has kept the provision in place to serve as possible leverage against Baku.



Kazakhstan's Foreign Minister Beibut Atamkulov (C) speaks during a C5+1 format meeting between United States and Central Asia countries Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan in Nur Sultan, Kazakhstan on August 21, 2019. (Aliia Raimbekova - Anadolu Agency)

Central Asia

Similar to the South Caucasus, Central Asia remains a second-tier area of interest for US foreign policy and there has largely been continuity in American policies towards the region throughout past presidencies. During the first term of the Obama administration, Washington did not diverge from the policies of the Bush administration and continued its presence in Afghanistan. However, in Obama's second term, the US began to withdraw from Afghanistan and created the C5+1 format that meant to foster cooperation between the US and five Central Asian nations. C5+1 became the major platform for cooperation between five Central Asian states³ and the US to develop the private sector in domestic markets, promote advanced energy solutions, take

action on the environment and stand against terrorism. Donald Trump continued the same cooperation format and tried to further develop it in early 2020. As the C5+1 continues to be a useful platform for the advancement of US interests in the region, the Biden administration is expected to remain committed to its viability.

Biden will likely continue the New US Strategy for Central Asia (USSCA, 2020) that was introduced in early 2020 and the implementation of it will be the priority of the administration's plans for the region. The Strategy's main goals are to strengthen the sovereignty of regional countries, promote the fight against terrorism, support stability in

³ Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan.

Afghanistan, promote regional development and ties, promote human rights and the rule of law, and finally, provide US assistance concerning investment. This strategy aligns with Biden's policies to bring the US back to a position of global leadership, as the document allows for further development of US-Central Asian political, commercial and social ties. Earlier this year, Washington directed its focus towards Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, creating the Central Asian Investment Partnership (US Embassy in Tashkent, 2021). Kazakhstan will also remain the US' largest trade partner in the region, with almost \$2 billion in trade a year. However, these numbers are considered too low to draw significant attention from US foreign policymakers to the region. Therefore, it is the geostrategic value of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan vis-à-vis Afghanistan that holds the potential to further boost their prioritisation within the US. Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan are the major military and economic powers in the C5+1 format, which also foresees stability for Afghanistan through regional cooperation. Two-decades after the US invasion, it is Afghanistan that may ultimately determine the level of interest in the region by the US foreign policy community.

Within the region, Uzbekistan stands out; the leadership of Shavkat Mirziyoyev has arguably opened a new path for development in the country. Mirziyoyev is interested in opening the country to investment, using the rising potential of youth and restructuring financial and bureaucratic systems. The US is also willing to cooperate with Mirziyoyev and his vision for reforms that could potentially create a new US ally in the region. Besides supporting the efforts of Tashkent, the US is also seeking to make Uzbekistan a member of the WTO. On the military side of cooperation, Washington is planning to support Uzbek efforts to reform the military by supplying high-quality military training (Omeliicheva, 2019). In 2018, the US-Uzbekistan 5-year plan of military cooperation was signed, which will further boost Uzbek cooperation with NATO. During the rule of Islam Karimov, the predecessor of Mirziyoyev, Uzbekistan had a closed economy and limited interaction with powers such as the US and China. Mirziyoyev's policies aim to open the country to the world and not limit interaction to Russia alone. Under the Biden administration, Washington has a chance to turn Uzbekistan into a new American ally in the region, which could serve to help balance both Russian and Chinese influence in the region.

For its part, Kyrgyzstan is stepping into a new future after the latest domestic turmoil and Presidential elections. The country was heavily supported by the US during its 'Tulip Revolution' and since then has started its democratic experiment, witnessing instability, riots, political assassinations and imprisonments over the last 15 years. In 2014, the US withdrew from Manas Air Base following pressure from

the pro-Russian Kyrgyz government, which joined the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) the same year. Washington saw these developments as a threat to the democratisation and liberalisation processes in the country. Kyrgyz-American relations have been at a low since the US government gave the Human Rights Defender award to now-deceased human rights activist Azimzhan Askarov back in 2015. The Kyrgyz government had accused Askarov of stirring up ethnic hatred and the award led to the termination of a 1993 cooperation agreement between the two countries. Under the Trump administration, Kyrgyzstan faced limits on American visas and green cards. However, one of Biden's first executive orders lifted these restrictions on January 20, 2021, which arguably opens a path to improved relations (Putz, 2021). Furthermore, newly elected Kyrgyz president Sadyr Japarov stated his commitment to a multi-vector foreign policy. Combining Biden's ambitions to restore historic ties with former allies and positive statements from Bishkek, some changes in relations, such as a new cooperation agreement, can be expected.

The US administration's policies in the region will be primarily driven by its effort to balance Chinese and Russian influence. The USSCA allows the development of current relations but also gives a chance to regain former allies such as Kyrgyzstan. Bilateral relations will not only depend on Biden's will, but also on the national interests of regional countries. The promotion of democratic values and the rule of law to sustain a growing economy will be Washington's priorities in the region. Additionally, Biden may choose to work with regional organisations such as the Turkic Council to promote peace, cooperation and stability in the region. Both C5+1 and the USSCA are building the necessary foundations to integrate the US into regional development projects. Overall, Washington's activities in the region will be mainly geared towards Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, while not undermining the other C5+1 partners.

Conclusion

The latest developments in the South Caucasus after the 2020 Karabakh War have reshaped the balance in the region. Turkey and Russia have become the main mediators and actors, while the West has lost influence and prestige. However, all is not lost for Washington; both Azerbaijan and Armenia are still interested in continuing multi-vector foreign policies. However, while Yerevan remains stuck with Russian power, Baku is hesitant to fully trust the new administration in Washington. Ultimately, renewed US engagement in the region will depend on the trajectory of Turkey-US and US-Russian relations. Renewed engagement with Iran will also play a significant role in US policy in the South Caucasus.

The situation in Central Asia is more predictable given the likelihood of continuity with the US' 2020 region-

al strategy. President Biden will likely seek to use US economic power to support regional countries while closely cooperating with Uzbekistan in the military sphere. Kazakhstan's economic potential and positive developments in Kyrgyzstan may further contribute to the US return to the region. The security paradigm in Afghanistan will be another important determinant in US relations with regional states.

Overall, either positive or neutral stances are expected from the Biden administration concerning these two regions. However, both regions are unlikely to become priorities for the Biden administration. Like the South Caucasus, US policy towards Central Asia will be largely determined by factors related to the US approach to Russia and China on the one hand, and regional powers such as Turkey and Iran on the other.



Under the Trump administration, Kyrgyzstan faced limits on American visas and green cards. However, one of Biden's first executive orders lifted these restrictions on January 20, 2021, which arguably opens a path to improved relations. (EPA/Doug Mills/POOL - Anadolu Agency)

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