



NEW TEAM IN THE WHITE HOUSE – IMPLICATION FOR PAKISTAN

By
Mahrukh Khan
Research Fellow

Centre for Strategic Perspectives (CSP), ISSI

Edited by
Najam Rafique

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There is a new team in the White House and President Biden's selection of the members of his cabinet will wield considerable influence over the trajectory of US policies under his administration. The nominees reflect the diversity of color, race and creed in the new administration as several of the nominees would make history as the first of their kind to serve in the high offices. President Joe Biden nominees have work experience and ace credentials, with many who have served in the Obama administration as Biden's colleagues.

Biden promises a return of old standards of predictability and stability in the White House. While there are chances that Biden may reverse course on several of Trump administration decisions and adopt a more "multilateralist" foreign policy, his policy overtures towards South Asia may show considerable continuity with his predecessor.

Kamala Harris-Vice President: The senator has been a vocal critic of human rights abuses whether in India or China. She has fervently critiqued Narendra Modi government's decision to repeal Article 370 in the Indian Occupied Kashmir.¹ Kamala Harris views on the issue of human rights abuses in Kashmir have caused unease in India as many speculate that the Biden-Harris administration would

¹ Salvatore Babones, "Bad News for India's Modi, *Foreign Policy*, November 6, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/11/06/biden-harris-india-modi-election/>

raise the issue of secularism and minority rights with New Delhi² and may give birth to an underbelly of troubles for the Modi administration.

Ron Klain-White House Chief of Staff: A lawyer, Ron Klain has served as a longtime aide to President-elect Joe Biden during the Obama administration.

William Burns-CIA Director: During his service in the Obama administration, Burns promoted rebalancing of US's foreign policy toward Asia, by forging relationships as well as alliances that will make the US stronger. His incline towards the region of South Asia reflects the approach that was underway during President Obama's tenure. Burns has firmly believed in a stable Pakistan-US relationship which is entrenched in the shared goal of a stable, secure, and prosperous Pakistan and is a supporter of Pakistan's economic revival.³

Lloyd Austin-Secretary of Defense: With little professional experience in Asia, Austin Lloyd's appointment as the Secretary of Defense by President Biden has come under criticism and has rung alarm bells not just in the US but many corners of the world including India. The confirmation is being viewed as a slight break from the US's bipartisan consensus on its policy towards China with mellow underpinnings unlike what it was during Trump's tenure. The confirmation has also raised speculation in India as New Delhi believes that the US would strengthen relations with countries on China's periphery in order to contain it,⁴ which does not seem to be the case at the moment.

Antony Blinken-Secretary of State: Blinken was one of the key architects of President Obama's Pivot to Asia policy. He specializes on US policy towards China which lays the foundation of US policy towards two major nuclear states in South Asia; Pakistan and India. Moreover, his views on US policy towards China is similar to that of Trump as a result of which he views India as an ally to curtail the expansion of China not just in the region but around the world.⁵

John Kerry-Special Presidential Envoy for Climate: The special presidential envoy for the climate is a new Cabinet-level role announced by President Joe Biden. John Kerry has previously served as Secretary of State to Obama and was also the main architect of the Paris Climate Accord. While serving as the US Secretary of State, John Kerry referred to Pakistan as a country in a key position in

² Bilal Kuchay, "Will a Biden-Harris Administration Confront Modi on Human Rights?" *Al-Jazeera*, November 16, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/11/16/biden-harris-win-what-it-means-for-india>

³ "Statement by Deputy Secretary of State William J. Burns on Visiting Pakistan," US Department of State, May 9, 2014, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/s/d/former/burns/remarks/2014/225906.htm>

⁴ Abhijnan Rej, "As Biden Picks Austin for Defense Secretary, Nagging Fears Resurface," *Diplomat*, December 12, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/12/as-biden-picks-austin-for-defense-secretary-nagging-fears-resurface/>

⁵ "Why Blinken's appointment as US Secretary of State is bad news for Pakistan, China," *Zee News*, Nov 24, 2020, <https://zeenews.india.com/world/explained-why-antony-blinkens-appointment-as-us-secretary-of-state-is-a-bad-news-for-pakistan-china-2326268.html>

South Asia.⁶ He has also been a keen supporter of bilateral and multilateral dialogues in the region and believes in coordination rather than confrontation.

Alejandro Mayorkas-Secretary of Homeland Security – confirmation needed: **The Secretary of Homeland Security** advises the President on many issues primarily; security within the US, as well as other numbers of issues including counterterrorism, immigration, and cyber-security. Alejandro Mayorkas was the Deputy Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security during Obama's tenure. Post a Senate confirmation, Mayorkos will head the department and will be the first Latino and the first immigrant to hold this position.

Linda Thomas-Greenfield-US Ambassador to the United Nations - confirmation needed: With more than three decades of experience, Linda Thomas-Greenfield is a career diplomat. She was the Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of African Affairs during Bush tenure and Director General of the Foreign Service during President Barack Obama's tenure.

Avril Haines-Director of National Intelligence: The Director of NI leads the overall intelligence community of the US, comprising of 17 agencies and organizations and advises the President on national security issues. Avril Haines is the first woman to head the post of Director NI. She has previously served as Obama administration's principal Deputy National Security Advisor and the Deputy Director of the Central Intelligence Agency.

Jake Sullivan-National Security Adviser: Sullivan also served as the NSA to Biden when he was vice president. He was also the lead negotiator in talks that led to the Iran nuclear deal. Sullivan views the South Asian region through the lens of Beijing. He has been vocal about countering China's diplomatic narrative, and to stand up against the face of Beijing's aggression.⁷

Mike Donilon-Senior Adviser to the President: Mike Donilon worked as a Counselor to Biden during Obama's tenure when Biden was the Vice President and was Biden's chief strategist during his presidential campaign.

Implications for Pakistan

Joe Biden's victory brings a significant change in the White House. For four larger countries of South Asia, China, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and India the impact of this change will be felt directly. Biden brings to the presidency a consistency that has been missing from the White House in the past four

⁶ "Pakistan Has 'Very, Very Key Position' in South Asia; Kerry," *Dawn*, June 14, 2014, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1112637>

⁷ "Passing the Baton 2021: Securing America's Future Together," *United States Institute for Peace*, January 29, 2021. <https://www.usip.org/events/passing-baton-2021-securing-americas-future-together>

years. His pick of the cabinet reflects an amalgamation of cultures, languages and Diasporas that exist in the US and now in his administration.

To be successful in South Asia, however, Biden will need to commit to a new approach to the region, as it will confront a slew of regional challenges, including China's growing clout; strained Pakistan-India relations, and the Afghanistan peace process.

US relations with Pakistan will be dependent on certain determinants including, the trajectory of US relationship with China, US-India strategic partnership, and the success of peace negotiations in Afghanistan. While the cabinet picks by President Biden reflect on policies relatively similar to that of Obama's term, the ground realities have changed significantly. At the same time, it is important to note that Pakistan has moved away from its dependency on the US both in terms of economic and military assistance. However, that has not diminished Pakistan's importance in the region for the US as it still remains a bridge between US successes in Afghanistan. The inevitable withdrawal of the US forces from Afghanistan means that the US-Pakistan relationship will soon need to identify a new basis for cooperation. Nothing would be more ideal than a proactive economic and trade relationship.

On Afghanistan, Biden has been a votary of a withdrawal of US troops from the country. He has also been supportive of the peace process in Afghanistan that was started during the Trump presidency. However, the Biden administration has indicated that it plans to review the Afghan peace deal that was struck between Trump and the Taliban for a May 1, 2021 deadline to pull all American troops out of the country.⁸ Biden administration's go-ahead with the peace deal will be conditional on whether the Taliban adhere to three pre-requisites; Taliban cutting ties with other terrorists groups, reduction in violence, and upholding cease-fire.⁹

On India, while the Biden administration can be expected to speak out more frequently on the issues of human rights abuses, it will almost certainly take care to ensure that its criticism is neither so stinging nor so repetitive that it ends up alienating the Indian leadership. Moreover, the China factor can also be expected to play a major role in determining the nature and scope of the Indo-US partnership as well US relationship with Pakistan.

⁸ Adam Nossiter and Thomas Gibbons-Neff, "Violence May Delay U.S. Troop Withdrawal from Afghanistan," *New York Times*, January 29, 2021.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/29/world/asia/afghanistan-withdrawal-ghani-biden.html>

⁹ "Passing the Baton 2021: Securing America's Future Together," United States Institute for Peace, January 29, 2021. <https://www.usip.org/events/passing-baton-2021-securing-americas-future-together>