



საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობების კვლევის ფონდი
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Security Review

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**US Foreign Policy Challenges and Achievements in the First 8 Months
of Joseph Biden's Presidency**

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September 20 will mark exactly eight months since Joseph Biden took over the presidency of the United States. The purpose of our review is to assess the activities of his administration in the international political arena, which obviously cannot be understood in isolation from the ongoing processes within the country and the decisions made in domestic politics.

When assessing the steps taken by President Biden and his administration in international relations, we must first look at the legacy he inherited from the previous president and his administration. This will be one of the primary elements based upon which we will assess the performance of the 46th President of the United States and his administration. To put it very modestly, the situation that Joseph Biden faced inside the country and abroad after Donald Trump was really not simple: A polarized society within the United States and a complicated relationship with international partners. Naturally, all this was further complicated by the very difficult epidemiological state in the country precipitated by the pandemic, and the significantly deteriorating socio-economic situation.

Clearly, the citizens of the United States expected the Joseph Biden administration, first and foremost, to deal quickly and effectively with the major domestic challenges. Tensions reached a peak in American society after radical and extremist groups penetrated the Capitol on January 6. As a result, Joseph Biden's main message and first steps were aimed at calming and uniting society within the country.

Of course, it would not be right to discuss these dramatic processes only in a domestic context. The tensions within the country have been closely monitored by both US partners, including Georgia, as well as its rivals and enemies. We cannot really say that Joe Biden was able to heal the American public during these 8 months, as he promised in his inaugural speech, but the situation has calmed down somewhat, and the processes have indeed shifted towards a quieter and more professional course.

The Joseph Biden administration has made significant efforts to deal with the pandemic in terms of accelerating vaccination rates and stabilizing the financial and economic situation. Six months after taking office, Biden ceremoniously announced that 300 million vaccines had been administered [during](#) his presidency. This result is indeed impressive, however, the rapid spread of the Delta variant has reinvigorated the intensity of the pandemic. Further, on Biden's initiative, first a \$1.9 trillion stabilization package was approved by the [US Senate](#), and then an [agreement](#) was reached to allocate \$1 trillion for US infrastructure. These important decisions made it possible to create more than 3 million additional jobs, although another 6 million jobs are necessary to reach the pre-pandemic level.

Clearly, attaining or failing to achieve political and economic stability within the world's number one state has a direct impact on global stability. Yet, both US partners and rivals attach even greater importance to the steps Joseph Biden would take in international relations to strengthen the US positions.

The fastest and, arguably most uncontroversial, decisions were made in terms of returning to the international climate change system. Within the first hours of the presidency, one of the first documents signed by Joseph Biden was the plan to rejoin the Paris Agreement.

A rapid decision was also made to rejoin international structures, in particular the World Health Organization, and to apply to the UN Human Rights Council to reinstate the United States as a member country.

The most important signal vis-à-vis the transatlantic allies was voiced both in the inaugural speech and in the concrete steps and decisions taken afterwards. "The United States is back," were the words Joseph Biden used in a speech addressing partners on Capitol Hill on January 20, and also later at the G7, NATO, and the US-EU summits in June. At a brief but politically significant summit of the North Atlantic Alliance, the 46th US President reaffirmed that his country views NATO as a key cornerstone of global security, and not only is it not going to leave the alliance, as his predecessor indicated, but it also intends to maintain the status of a leading country. He also spoke with less rigor about member states meeting the commitment to increase their defense budgets.

Besides the declarations, decisions were made that delighted the European partners. Ahead of a meeting with the EU heads of state, a 17-year dispute between the parties over Boeing and Airbus state subsidies was resolved. It was also decided that trade tariffs imposed on European products during Donald Trump's presidency would be suspended. German Chancellor Angela Merkel had reason to be particularly pleased, as President Biden overturned his predecessor's decision to withdraw American troops from the German city of Rammstein. However, this was not the only and by far not the most precious gift from President Biden to Ms. Merkel before her departure. In the weeks leading up to the June summit, the Biden administration decided not to impose sanctions on the Nordstream 2 operator company and its chief executive - a friend and colleague of Vladimir Putin, a former high-ranking official of the East German security service - Olaf Warning. This unpleasant information was criticized by NATO member Poland and the Baltic states. Obviously, Ukraine's reaction was especially severe, since the implementation of the Nordstream 2 project is considered by Ukraine as a direct threat to its sovereignty and stability. On the other hand, it was really good news for Vladimir Putin, who at the time was preparing to meet with President Biden in Geneva.

Numerous opinions, criticisms, and assumptions were expressed before and after the summit between President Biden and Vladimir Putin. In the end, most experts agreed that both sides came out from the meeting victorious. In my humble opinion, Vladimir Putin benefited more, as it was important to him, first and foremost for domestic consumption, that the West once again requests cooperation and the re-establishment of relations. Joseph Biden reached an agreement to initiate strategic stability dialogue on nuclear weapons, and raised the issues of preventing hacker attacks on specific strategic infrastructure facilities from Russian territory, and Russia's non-interference in US domestic affairs. The extent to which the Russian President will take President Biden's demands into account remains to be seen; however, precisely after this meeting in July, Vladimir Putin's own positions were further strengthened by the attempt of German and French leaders to organize a summit with Russia. At the time, their attempt failed, once again with the efforts of the leaders of Poland, the Baltic states, and several other European states. Although Angela Merkel still went to Russia on a farewell visit, a month earlier she had visited Washington, where the issue of the completion and operation of Nordstream 2 was finally resolved. Ukraine's efforts only succeeded in getting Germany and the United States to reach an

agreement with Russia, under which it will continue to supply gas to Europe using Ukraine's pipeline infrastructure, albeit guaranteed only until 2024. President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelensky's visit to the White House also took place only after all the above-mentioned bilateral and multilateral summits. [According to Zelensky](#) himself, it is difficult for him to say whether a "chemistry" between he and President Biden was established, however, he claimed the meeting went smoothly, in a working environment, and while there were difficult moments, these were not with regards to complaints against Ukraine or him personally. Even though, during this visit, Ukraine received a decision on \$60 million in military assistance from the United States, and agreements on defense and energy were signed, the decision on Nordstream 2, and the ignoring of Ukraine's loud demands to grant it a NATO Membership Action Plan, clearly indicates that in the fight against Russia, Ukraine will have to overcome its difficulties independently. It seems that European and more so American partners have yet to be persuaded that Ukraine's fight against Russia is not just a fight for Ukraine's security and stability, but rather that Ukraine is at the forefront of Euro-Atlantic security.

Perhaps this visit could have been a little more impressive, and it would have drawn more attention had it not been for the very dire situation in Afghanistan. The Taliban's swift capture of Kabul and almost entire Afghanistan, and the chaos and anxiety that followed the last stage of withdrawal of coalition forces from Afghanistan, as well as the evacuation of embassy staff, contracted US citizens, and Afghan translators who worked for the coalition for two decades, and above all the terrorist act carried out in Kabul Airport, overshadowed all other issues in all intensity.

I would like to emphasize once again that the United States and the coalition forces should have left Afghanistan much earlier. According to opinion polls conducted in the US in September, the withdrawal of troops is still supported by the majority of respondents, but the unrest in the last phase of the withdrawal, and the death of 13 US servicemen, caused significant damage to Joseph Biden's personal reputation, as well as US prestige in the international arena and its relations with partners. Biden's rating dropped by 7% after the Kabul Airport bombing, dipping below 50% for the first time in the eight months of his presidency. The question as to whether America had really returned was also raised loudly. Incidentally, this question was asked as early as after the summits in June, although then it [sounded](#) more rhetorical, while today, a very serious debate is going on in the UK and even in European capitals as to [whether Europe can rely on the United States](#). The French President's idea about the strategic autonomy of Europe and the creation of a European military unit independent of the United States has become relevant again. Skepticism about the idea remains high, although it is precisely the recent actions of the US administration that precipitated its resurrection. In the near future, developments in Afghanistan will be reflected repeatedly both in the US domestic policy and in its relations with international partners; however, in addition to Afghanistan, there are a number of strategic directions that will affect the US' role in global affairs, as well as its relations with allies and adversaries.

We have already discussed the Biden administration's policy towards Russia, which does not really give grounds for great optimism for countries like Ukraine and Georgia. We will return to this dimension at the end of our review, however, first we must address important issues such as

the US attitude towards a return to the Iran nuclear deal and, more generally, future relations with Iran under its new, ultra-conservative president, Ebrahim Raisi.

With regard to Afghanistan, Iran welcomed the US withdrawal and expressed hope that it would now be possible to establish peace and stability in the region. As for the nuclear program, the position of the new president of Iran is even tougher and, consequently, negotiations in this direction are uncertain. The statements and actions of the Iranian government indicate they are not going to back down, despite the fact that the economic situation has become very difficult for the country due to the severe US sanctions. On the contrary, Iran has resumed and accelerated the uranium enrichment process, complicating the issue of a US return to the agreement, as well as the standpoint of the Europeans in the process. For its part, the US is in no hurry to take a step towards joining the agreement, despite the statements made during the pre-election campaign that in Biden's presidency, the US would probably return to the so-called "nuclear deal" which was abandoned by Donald Trump. After the events in Afghanistan, the United States is in dire need of significant diplomatic success, but given the current situation and Iran's tough stance, the US will find it difficult to rejoin the aforementioned agreement without a serious concession to Iran.

In the context of US relations with Iran, and also in other respects, we must always remember Israel, whose current Prime Minister, Naftali Bennett, was also in Washington and met with Joseph Biden. According to a general consensus, the relationship between these two leaders is far from the quality of ties that existed between Donald Trump and Benjamin Netanyahu. Even though the political reality in Israel has changed dramatically, there has been no real revision of Israel's plans and attitudes towards Iran. The Israeli political and military leadership continues to assert that in the face of a real threat of Iran developing a nuclear weapon, Israel will not back down from attacking Iran independently. [According to them](#), the preparations in this regard are today moving at an even faster pace. As such, the US may face a serious dilemma in the near future.

When it comes to acquiring diplomatic victories and a strategic advantage, obviously, the first and foremost target of the US is the Chinese Communist Party. It is safe to say that the Joseph Biden administration has continued and developed the line of relationship with China established by Donald Trump. The multibillion-dollar tariffs on trade remain in place, and the US' critical rhetoric on human rights abuses against China has become even harsher. Moreover, the current US administration is trying to form a kind of coalition against China. Along with NATO allies, it is actively working with Australia, Japan, and India. However, it faces some difficulties even on this front. Although the EU and other partners have made tough statements in the last eight months, imposing the first personalized sanctions on Chinese officials and holding large-scale joint military exercises in the Indo-Pacific region, that does not mean they are ready to join the US and start a cold war with China. Each of them has serious trade and economic relations with China, which is a very interesting country for them both in terms of market access and investment. Thus, in the near future, Georgia should not expect any significant success vis-a-vis China either.

The end of the international security operation in Afghanistan will undoubtedly affect the day-to-day relations between the United States and Georgia. Georgia needs to think very seriously and urgently about the directions that need to be explored to further develop relations with its strategic partners. First of all, the recent decisions and actions of the US administration in relation to Russia, as well as the end to the war in Afghanistan, should be seriously analyzed. Given the significant foreign policy challenges described above, Georgia will need to make great efforts to be among the priority issues on the United States Administration's agenda. It would be unthinkable to do so unless Georgia itself implements the essential reforms within the country and offers new areas of cooperation to the US, be it free trade, realization of major infrastructure projects in Georgia, or cooperation against a Russia-produced hybrid war.

Another important aspect is security cooperation. The threat of terrorism is likely to increase in the near future after the Taliban's victory in Afghanistan. Cooperation in this direction may deepen further. As for strengthening military-political ties, the example of Afghanistan as a non-NATO ally of the United States has made it clear that this type of relationship cannot guarantee the same degree of security and stability as NATO membership. Only with the development of democratic institutions, and by returning the status of "champion of democracy" to the region and beyond, will Georgia be able to attract more attention from its partners and gain their support for NATO membership. Georgia needs to increase its diplomatic efforts tenfold in order to reassure its American partners that, in light of recent developments in the South Caucasus and the Middle East, rebuilding and consolidating positions in the region is in US interests, and, to this end, strengthening Georgia as a loyal and reliable partner is vital.