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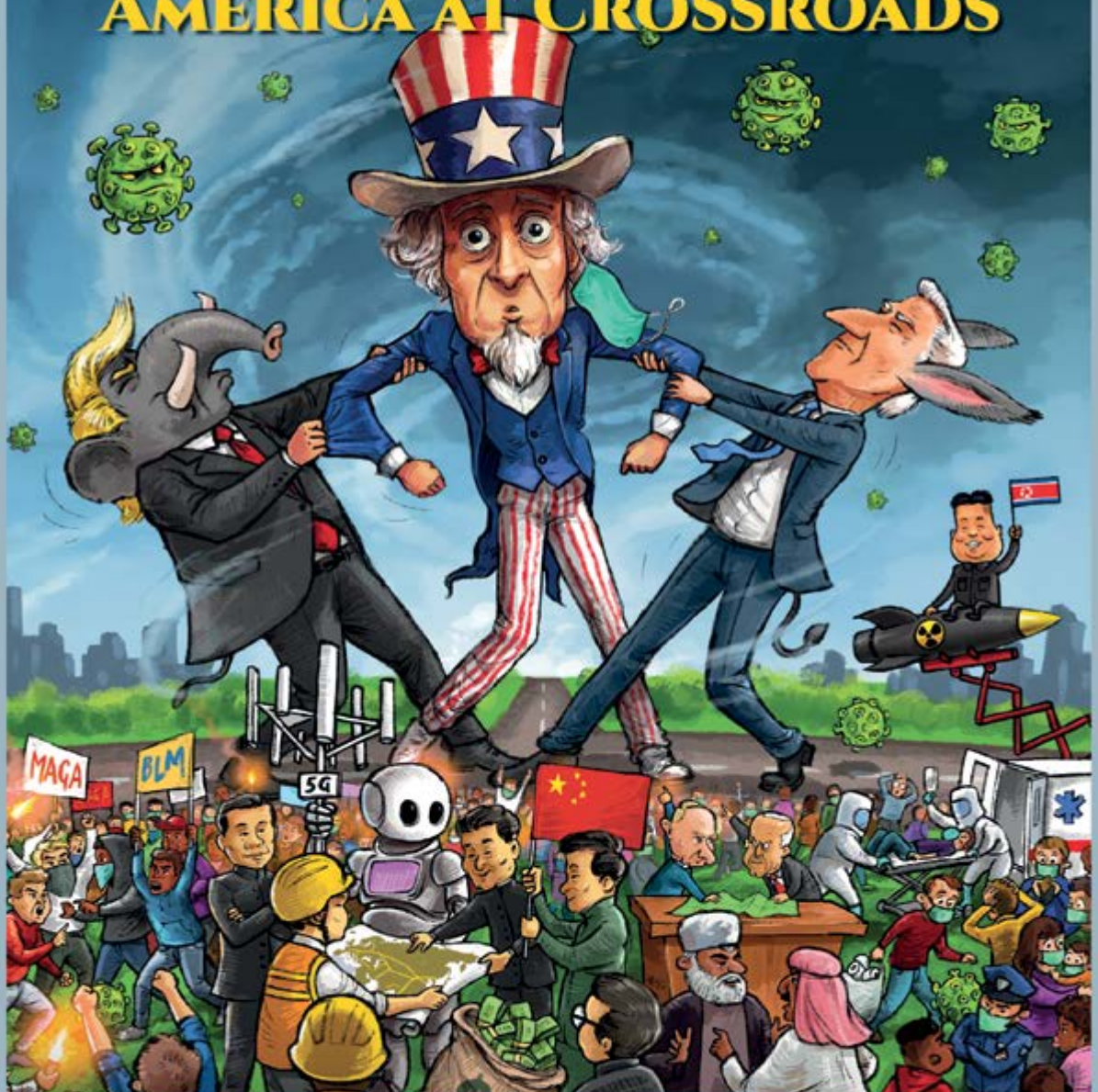
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# HORIZONS

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## AMERICA AT CROSSROADS



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# AMERICA & THE BALKANS, 2021

*Cameron Munter*

AS the U.S. presidential election looms, many Americans feel the choice is the most significant in their lifetimes. The polarized electorate is dominated by voices that claim that a victory by their opponent will mark the end of American power and traditions. Of course, nearly all of these opinions are based on domestic policy issues like the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, economic growth to environmental policy, and race and social justice—and even specific issues like abortion and gun control.

But what can we guess, at this point, about how America will address foreign policy issues in the time ahead? If there is a foreign policy issue of central concern, it's how to deal with China and the challenge it poses—not only in the Western Pacific but as a global power.

There is, ironically, little difference between the Trump and Biden campaigns on the basic contours of the issue: both see China as a threat, and the question is only how to best address such a challenge. And the ways in which the two candidates pose this question give a hint about approaches to other foreign policy issues around the world. Trump (when he's not praising President Xi Jinping as a good friend) wants to place the blame for the coronavirus squarely on China and to continue a policy of confrontation via bilateral trade and investment policies. Biden, a seasoned veteran of decades of bilateral American relations with China, would seek rather to rally America's friends and allies to provide a united front to either coax or force China to behave in one way or another, whether it's in the South China Sea or on transnational issues like public health and climate change.

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Photo: FoNET

*America & the Balkans, 2020*

So to begin with, look for very distinct foreign policy styles: Trump is bilateral, focused on economics, seeking U.S. advantage in what he sees as a zero-sum game; Biden is multilateral, focused on the integration of strategic aims and institutions, placing a greater premium on shared goals and values.

And for those who follow issues in the Balkans, what to anticipate from either a continuation of the Trump Administration, or the entry into power of a Biden Administration? Just as we see throughout the international arena, the most obvious distinction will be this difference of style.

## TRUMP AND THE BALKANS

Let's begin with the Trump Administration. The mantra of "America First" is well known. For those who sympathize with Trump—whether at home or abroad—this translates into a firm belief that countries (not just the United States, but every sovereign state) should follow and advance their respective core interests. This has resulted, in the years of the current administration, in a focus above all on economic interests, as might be expected of a business-oriented leader.

Richard Grenell, currently a Trump campaign advisor who is also his Balkan envoy, outlined this approach

in a recent article in which he recommended a radical overhaul for the U.S. State Department, noting that diplomatic training and knowledge of foreign languages was less important than business training and making deals—in other words, that traditional diplomacy did not serve the needs of countries seeking to maximize their advantage over others.

Note that Trump’s unsuccessful efforts in North Korea and Iran were accompanied by offers to make business deals with both countries (offers that

neither country chose to accept). His more successful foray in the Middle East, resulting in the recognition of Israel by Bahrain and the UAE, builds on economic relationships that have been developing in the region for decades. In this sense, Trump’s foreign policy is essentially an extension of his domestic policy.

Now look at the recent set of agreements signed at the White House by the leaders of Serbia and Kosovo. These documents are heavy on economic issues, some repeated from previous agreements but others innovative, such as the establishment of an office of the Development Finance

Corporation (DFC) in the region. They also included apparently unrelated issues: Trump’s campaign to please domestic constituencies by injecting language about Israel recognizing Kosovo and Serbia moving its embassy in

Israel to Jerusalem were about America First, clearly.

Other, more heavily political (and thus intractable) issues in the Western Balkans apparently interest the Trump Administration less. Is there a potential challenge to Montenegro’s commitment to NATO following the most

recent parliamentary election? If there is high level interest in this question, it’s hard to find, given Trump’s oft-stated doubts about the importance of NATO to begin with.

What about the crisis of governance in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as the Dayton Accords (always designed as a means to end a war rather than to perpetuate a peace) show their age and a feeling of despondency sets in as entrenched interests throughout the country seem determined to keep power first and meet the needs of their constituents later? Again, this is not something that the White House has shown much evidence of monitoring.

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Even the prospects for a new era between North Macedonia and Greece don’t seem to excite the Trump Administration’s leadership.

It would thus appear that those problems in the Western Balkans that are hard to reduce to a business deal are simply not on Trump’s agenda. If you want to put this in a positive light, you can call it prioritization: the Trump Administration wanted a win and it wanted it now, so the most likely candidate was the Kosovo-Serbia relationship. If you want to put this in a negative light, such an approach smacks of shortsightedness and a disinclination to take part in the difficult, patient work of traditional diplomacy.

This is an important distinction for those who want to analyze the Trump Administration’s record. For the president and his team, foreign policy does not have a long timeline. The point is to get results now, much as the point for many businesses is to get results in the current quarter in order to show shareholders and the market the successes of a firm.

Traditional diplomacy is in many ways a process that works from the bottom up, as experts prepare laboriously and at length before a summit in

which leaders from different countries come together to finalize an agreement. Such diplomacy assumes that details matter, that the long-term results of an agreement must be anticipated in advance lest that agreement have unforeseen consequences that future generations must contend with.

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Such is not the case for the style of diplomacy of this Trump Administration, which is very much top-down. Those agreements signed by this administration have been the

aspirations of leaders rather than the painstaking work of a bureaucracy: notably short on details but big on image. Indeed, the image (say, of a signing in the Oval Office or a handshake between erstwhile opponents) is in many ways the end result rather than the beginning of a long and careful process of implementation, as one would see from agreements in the past, whether bilateral arms control pacts or dense texts signed in a multilateral setting.

### BIDEN’S APPROACH

So if this is the style of the Trump Administration—primarily for his domestic audience, heavily oriented toward business, overwhelmingly bilateral—what will be the style of a Biden Administration, in the event of a victory at the polls by the former Vice President?

The Biden team will almost certainly focus on interconnectedness rather than bilateral policy. It will see the Western Balkans not as a discrete opportunity for an achievement that it can sell to American supporters, but rather as part of a series of challenges inherited from the Trump Administration.

This approach will not be unique to the Western Balkans. A Biden Administration is likely to work very hard to repair relations with Japan and Korea before tackling North Korea; a Biden Administration is also likely to test the capacity for cooperation among the so-called

P5+1 (UN Security Council permanent members plus Germany) before crafting a new policy on Iran. There will almost certainly be efforts, if there is a Biden Administration, to rally like-minded countries and invigorate the traditional institutions of the post-1945 rule-based order rather than continuing the current head-to-head fight with China.

And so it will be in the Western Balkans. First and foremost, expect a Biden Administration to focus on repairing relations with Europe (both with Europeans, that is, with the leaders

of Germany, France, and the UK first and foremost, and with institutions, especially NATO and the EU). The issues that a Biden Administration will identify as priorities in its relations with Europe—climate change, nuclear proliferation, demographic challenges including migration, relations with Russia, the Middle East, and other neighbors—will doubtlessly lead to efforts to work multilaterally: to build alliances in order to leverage Western strength to address these crises. Only then will the leadership of a Biden Administration see how that Transatlantic relationship can address the issues of the Western Balkans.

What form will this take? I expect that a Biden team would look at a number of issues and work through, in great detail, how those issues could be bundled together to produce what the Germans would call a *Gesamtkonzept*, an overarching formula notable not for its simplicity but for its comprehensiveness. That means slow, steady work for American and European diplomats, sorting through issues from tariffs and Russia to energy and common defense. And of course, one of those many issues would necessarily include the Western Balkans.

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Traditional diplomacy is often tedious, not always transparent, and certainly focused more on getting things right for a consensus of interests than getting things done quickly in the interest of any given participant. I imagine that for Western Balkan leaders and indeed, for the people of the region—impatient as they are for solutions to their many challenges—such a method could be frustrating even if it evaluates the long-term impact of whatever is decided.

I thus believe that American success or failure in the Balkans will be a reflection of the success or failure of a Biden

Administration's rebuilding of ties with Europe. Now, many have already cautioned Biden's team that they must avoid trying to restore the status quo ante of pre-2016 relations. The world of 2021 is not the world of 2016, and this effort will require a rebalancing of approaches. For the Western Balkans, that will mean that the Biden team must assess new realities.

There was a tendency before 2016 to assume U.S.-European primacy in the region; now any approach must consider the impact of Chinese investment (and how it's perceived), Russian attitudes, and even Turkish designs. While the so-called Quint coordinating mechanism (cooperation between

America, Germany, France, the UK, and Italy) can still play a constructive role, this grouping is no longer sufficient to dominate coordination among interested Western parties in the Balkans. Public opinion polls in the region show that the gravitational pull of EU membership on Western Balkan

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states is not what it was. So what this means is that a Biden Administration, while building relations with Europe, must also reconsider what the United States and Europe, working together again, might achieve in the Western Balkans.

Indeed, much of this debate will continue to take place in Europe even without American participation, as Europeans debate their role in the world, especially in defense. Recent articles and public opinion polling indicate that it will not be easy for Americans to reengage with European counterparts because those counterparts will want to be careful about what kind of America they're dealing with and whether perceptions are shared on both sides of the Atlantic.

Furthermore, the Europeans have not had an easy time of it in the last decade. There was a time not so long ago when EU foreign policy looked east or south

with the assumption that it would be the party of action in, say, Ukraine or Libya. It would be a matter of Europe working its will on its neighbors. But now, Europe is no longer just the subject. Rather, the EU is also the object of Russian activities or the desires of refugees crossing the Mediterranean. So for America and Europe to work as partners in the Western Balkans, as I believe a Biden Administration would like, both will have to work out a new set of priorities and roles in this new decade. This is not just an exercise in making lists of preferences and seeing where we all agree. No, there will be a significant psychological dimension to this, which will take wisdom and care to manage.

Let's also not forget that a Biden Administration would have baggage in the Western Balkans. Dayton and the Kosovo war took place under a Democratic administration, even if they were embraced by the Republican administration that followed. And Trump has caused a set of radical breaks with Republican foreign policy traditions and values. Biden has not, and would not, do the same for the Democrats. Indeed, under a Biden presidency we might even see a return

of some of the same people who were in power in previous Democratic administrations (quite a contrast from the emergence of a fairly new set of foreign policy leaders under Trump).

*Just as I hope that a second-term Trump Administration might avail itself of more multilateral help, I hope that a Biden Administration would build on what might remain useful rather than reinventing an entirely new approach.*

In this sense, as I hinted above, a Biden Administration would also be wise to assess with an open mind those initiatives which the Trump Administration has begun. I mentioned the DFC, for example: it's a welcome, concrete instance of U.S. commitment to the region's economic growth. And there's no doubt a Biden

Administration would continue the Trump Administration's skeptical view of Chinese influence in the region, as it will tackle the challenge of the Belt and Road Initiative globally. Just as I hope that a second-term Trump Administration might avail itself of more multilateral help, I hope that a Biden Administration would build on what might remain useful rather than reinventing an entirely new approach.

**HOPES AND SUGGESTIONS**

Whoever wins the American presidency in November, my own hope is that the United States figures out how to contribute in a constructive and positive way to the crisis

of governance in the Western Balkans. Bosnia is, in my mind, only the most extreme example of bad governance. The wave of emigration from all the countries of the Western Balkans—affecting above all the most talented and enterprising of the young—is testament to the lack of faith in the honesty and sense of fair play among those who are in charge.

This will require generosity and empathy on the part of the United States and its representatives: if efforts over the past three decades—focused as they were on human rights and economic and social development—have not brought about a just and prosperous society and peace among nations, then perhaps we Americans need to reflect what might.

In other words, my own hope is that the winner of the American election, no matter what style that winner

chooses, will recommit itself to the goal of peace, prosperity, and good neighborly relations in the Western Balkans and use as many tools at hand as it can to contribute to that goal.

My respectful suggestion to a second Trump Administration would be to work with European friends whenever possible; I fear that so far, the Trump Administration's deal-making style has shown itself to be less than strategic, and the long term matters—and memories are long in the Balkans. And as for a Biden Administration, my respectful suggestion is not to be caught in patterns of the past but to reassess what's possible and give the U.S.-European approach to the Western Balkans a fresh start. And my respectful suggestion for the people of the Western Balkans themselves is that it's probably wise not to expect quick solutions to the very significant challenges facing the region. ●

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