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Interview with Mr. David Sylvan, professor at the Graduate Institute 10 December 2020

FSPI : The start of Joe Biden's presidency could be fragile, as Donald Trump was able to significantly improve his 2016 score and the Senate could remain with a Republican majority. In any case, the situation is likely to be difficult, since a large part of the American people should remain loyal to Trump, who is likely to keep insisting that the election was rigged. What general impact could this political situation after the presidential election have on American foreign policy?

David Sylvan : I do not expect the tense political situation to have much impact on US foreign policy, notably because there is a fairly broad consensus between Democrats and Republicans on most foreign policy issues. Where there is not a consensus, for example, regarding the deal with Iran, or Israeli settlements, I would expect Biden to advance by small steps.

FSPI : Between the two extremes of either a global policing role or disengagement from world affairs, that the United States might choose, shouldn't the Biden administration commit instead pragmatically to a foreign policy supported by a bipartisan Congressional strategy and in accordance with the values and principles that best serve the interests of the American people?

David Sylvan : I am sure Biden would agree with this, but then so would any US president. The problem is how to define principles and interests. For example, assuming that the US has as a principle that no other great power should expand its range of diplomatic influence beyond a particular region, does that mean, qua interest, that multilateral economic pacts should be negotiated with countries in potentially endangered regions, or, as many in the Democratic Party have argued for decades, do US interests rather point in the direction of increasing domestic investment and production ?

FSPI : Some believe that the arrival at the White House of Joe Biden could resemble a third term of President Obama, the former being able to surf on the popularity of the latter in domestic politics in particular. However, Biden should stand out from Obama and his often-criticized foreign policy record. What could the new administration's foreign policy priorities and emphases be?

David Sylvan : I expect a series of actions which are both symbolically significant and relatively easy to accomplish : for example, rejoining the WHO, praising NATO and the EU, renewing cooperation on climate change issues, etc. None of those actions are, strictly speaking, new ; it's more accurate to describe them as a return to the status quo ante, but not necessarily an Obama-specific status quo ante. Biden is an old Washington hand, and from the start of his career, bought into the Washington consensus. So the policy he is likely to follow will be not only that of Obama but of Clinton, of Bush Sr., of Carter, etc. ; he will try to avoid everything Trump did, but also the anti-UN side of Bush Jr. and the anti-human rights side of Reagan.

FSPI : In foreign policy, an area that apparently lends itself more easily to consensus between Republicans and Democrats and which ensures a certain continuity in American diplomacy, the first commitments made by the President-elect seem to augur well. However, in addition to Biden's goal of repairing America's traditional alliances and restoring its leadership in international fora, should there be a return to some American (liberal) hegemony and a full reversal of Donald Trump's populist and protectionist "America first" trend?

David Sylvan : Absolutely. What is striking to me is not only that most US elites were opposed to protectionism or to most populist leaders, but that their counterparts in other countries, notably Western Europe, were unable, and to some degree even unwilling, to substitute collectively for US policies as they had been defined during the decades of US hegemony.

FSPI : While President Trump had constantly denigrated the European Union, in particular for not taking on more of its defense budget within the framework of NATO , the most "Atlantic" Europeans now hope for a return to the traditional transatlantic partnership, while continuing to benefit from the American umbrella to ensure their security. But the United States' international engagement has demonstrated over the past decade that it has been accompanied by an ever-increasing military disengagement around the world. Will the President-elect continue along the path set out by his predecessors, thereby indirectly encouraging Europeans to strengthen their common defense?

David Sylvan : I doubt it. To be sure, Biden is trying to find a way to get out of Afghanistan, but I don't see him withdrawing US troops from the 150-some countries in which they're currently stationed (and in 40 of which they are engaged in counterterror activities). As I said earlier, he is an old Washington hand, and happily went on junkets for years with people like John McCain. The real challenge he is likely to face on foreign policy will be from his left : on trade, for example, from people like Sherrod Brown (anti-free trade Democratic senator from Ohio), or on human rights from people like Jeff Merkley (Democratic senator from Oregon).

FSPI : As soon as he arrived at the White House, Donald Trump froze the negotiations for the Free Trade Agreement with the EU, while slapping tariffs on European steel and aluminum imports and threatening to impose a surtax on European cars. What could we expect from US trade policy towards the EU under the new administration?

David Sylvan : I would guess that Biden will try to negotiate an agreed-upon return to the status quo ante with the EU.

FSPI : President Trump buried the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) initiated by President Obama as part of the US strategy of pivotal focus on Asia, which aimed to counter Chinese domination in the Asia-Pacific region and then declared an unprecedented trade war with China. But the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), the world's largest regional FTA between the 10 ASEAN countries and Australia, New Zealand, Japan, South Korea and

China, came into being two years later, but without the US. Will the Biden administration succeed in helping to slow the world economy center of gravity moving towards Asia and strengthen its role as a well-established maritime power vis-à-vis a rising Chinese mainland power?

David Sylvan : This is a real conundrum for Biden. He would very much like to rejoin the TPP and to strengthen both bilateral and multilateral economic ties in Asia. But that might not work, because of the antipathy of the Democratic Party left toward such arrangements (after all, even during the 2016 campaign, Hillary Clinton distanced herself from the TPP). I would expect that Biden will, though, try to put an end to tariff wars with China, covering it up by tough rhetoric about human rights and speeches about the rule of law. There, I'd give him maybe a 50% chance of succeeding in succeeding; it's at least as likely that the long-term policy will be to encourage US firms to displace outsourced manufacturing from China to other Asian countries.

FSPI : While Donald Trump has had a fairly conciliatory attitude towards Vladimir Putin, for example by opposing a tightening of sanctions against Russia in the Ukrainian crisis, should Joe Biden return to a more balanced policy towards Russia and seek to stem Moscow's expansionist policy in Asia and the Middle East in particular? As far as disarmament is concerned, and given that Russia and the United States have withdrawn from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Weapons (INF) Treaty in recent years and that the New START Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty expires in 2021, do you think that the Biden administration could resume a lasting dialogue with Moscow in this area?

David Sylvan : I do think Biden will try to do so. There are some issue areas, such as nuclear weapons, where a deal is possible, and since Biden doesn't have as many nuclear-weapons lovers as Trump, this could work out. On the other hand, I expect Biden will try to be strongly anti-Putin regarding Eastern Europe and the Middle East. The issue is whether Biden will be able to separate the two clusters of issues.

FSPI : The deployment of 5G, a very important technological revolution if ever there was one, has become a major strategic and geopolitical issue, particularly between China and the United States. Could the Biden administration lift Washington's sanctions against Huawei by limiting its access to American technology? Could the US be in favor of a certain amount of competition in the telecommunications equipment and infrastructure market so that the rest of the world (Europe in particular) would not completely depend on American and Chinese suppliers?

David Sylvan : There, I can't say. Probably the Biden Administration will try to use Huawei as a bargaining chip in attempts to deescalate the tariff war with China. Will that succeed I doubt it, and I would guess that in the medium run, European leaders will find themselves increasingly pushed to distance themselves from China, and from Chinese companies, as well.

FSPI : The President-elect claims he wants to return to the Paris Climate Change Agreement, while the appointment of John Kerry as U.S. climate representative underscores his desire to accelerate the energy transition in his country. Do you think that the United States, the world's second biggest polluter, will be able to take the necessary steps towards carbon neutrality by 2050, following the example of the European Green New Deal? Will Joe Biden be able to implement his ambitious climate plan of 1.7 trillion over 10 years to develop renewable energies?

David Sylvan : There are a lot of things that can be done on climate change without Congressional approval, whether by reinterpretations of the tax code, of government purchases, of automobile emissions standards, or by executive decisions on opening areas to drilling.

FSPI : While Trump revoked the Vienna agreement on Iran's nuclear program in 2018, he pursued a policy of maximum pressure against Iran, while at the same time reinstating the UN pre-agreement sanctions and forcing Tehran to renegotiate by including Iran's regional policy and ballistic program in a new agreement. Now that Joe Biden has indicated his country's willingness to return to the bargaining table, what are the chances of the United States reaching a strengthened agreement while getting Tehran to return to strict compliance with the Vienna agreement?

David Sylvan : 50-50. It's in both sides' interests to reach an accord, though whether the accord will be announced publicly is another question.

FSPI : In the Middle East, the Biden administration could come up against certain limits, whereas Saudi Arabia is the traditional ally of the United States in the Gulf and a player to be taken into account both in the fight against Iran and on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In your opinion, will it build on the new dynamic initiated by Trump with the normalization of Israel's relations with certain Gulf monarchies and renew the dialogue with the Palestinians for a two-state solution while restoring American aid to the Palestinian Authority?

David Sylvan : No, this is an area where there should be significant changes. Biden will distance himself from Netanyahu, as well as from MBS. Add to that a limited detente with Tehran, and I would guess that we'll be in for a roller coaster ride in the next two years.

FSPI : While the US traditionally exerts a decisive political and financial influence on International Geneva, the return to unilateralism by the Trump administration has had a very negative impact on multilateral cooperation: withdrawal of the Human Rights Council deemed anti-Israeli, withdrawal of the WHO considered too Sino-Centric in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, the blocking of the WTO Appellate Body and more recently the appointment of the new Director-General of the institution. Joe Biden is known for his commitment to multilateralism - he has already indicated that the United States will (re)join the WHO. How do you see the chances of the United States regaining its full place in these institutions and at the same time actively contributing to the necessary reforms they need?

David Sylvan : Fairly good. Biden will want to support a broad range of multilateral institutions, and he can easily piggyback on a consensus about most of those institutions. And given the key role of the US, above all on budgetary, but also on logistical and planning issues, with many of these institutions, I think this will be an area of back to the future.