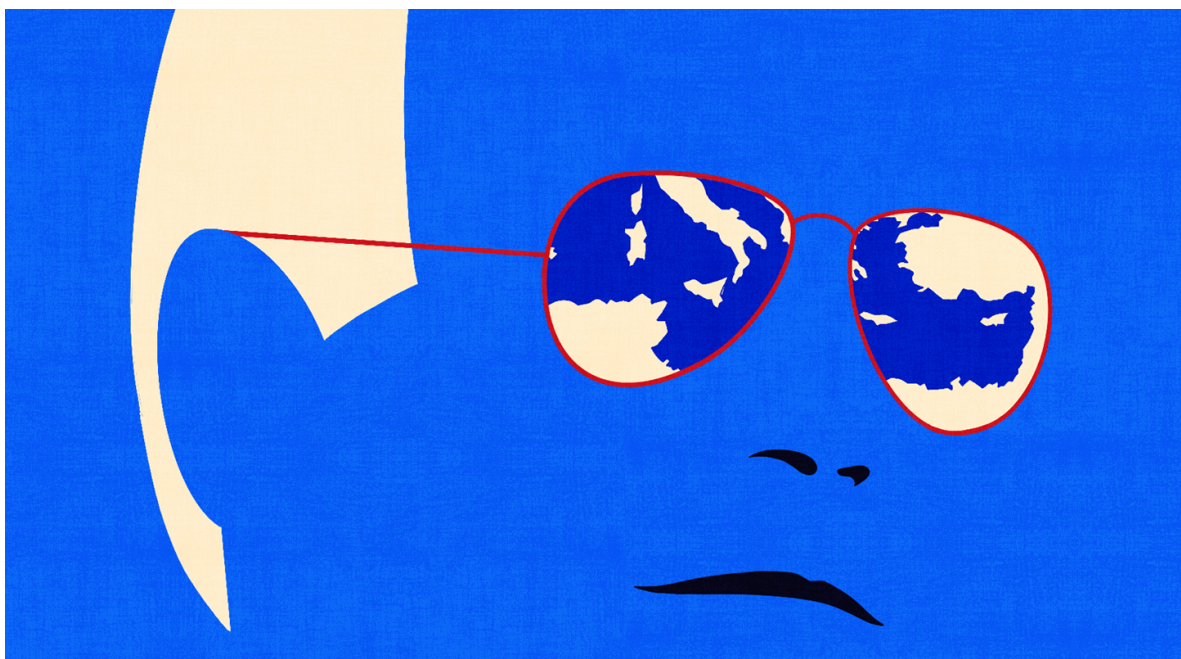


GEOPOLITICAL EVOLUTION

A U.S. Perspective on the Southern Mediterranean

How America Could Shift its Foreign Policy Approach in a Critical Regional Crossroads

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Il·lustració de [Carole Hénaff](#)

The election of Joe Biden as U.S. president in November 2020 offers an opportunity for the United States to reset its foreign policy around the world, and the Mediterranean region is at a vital intersection of many important global security challenges and opportunities. Biden comes into office at a time of tremendous turmoil and division inside of the United States, which is flirting with further deterioration in its democratic political system.

In the 2020 elections, Americans chose to remove President Donald Trump from office, but many split their overall ballots and voted for Republicans in Congress and state elections. The result was not a “blue wave” of Democrats sweeping into office or an alternative “red wave” of Republicans, but instead a very mixed, divided “purple haze” result that is likely to produce additional gridlock and rancor at home.

An international system in flux

This political dynamic within the U.S. comes at a time when the international system and geopolitics remain in a period of flux and turmoil. Russia and China drive an illiberalism that contributes to a global democratic recession well into its second decade. Freedom House data show a fourteen-year decline in global freedom, with 64 countries experiencing declines in freedom in 2019 versus 37 seeing improvements. “More than half of the countries that were rated Free or Not Free in 2009 have suffered a net decline in the past decade” [1].

Illiberal domestic political movements in Europe and the United States are part of this wave as they tap into domestic sources of discontent with the status quo, a situation this is likely to persist and challenge the very institutional frameworks that were prominent in the quarter century of the post-Cold War period. Two issues fueling the discontent and populism are economic inequality and immigration.

Stagnant economies and rising inequality have compounded the skewed distribution of gains from globalization in the United States and Europe. Within the United States, the middle of the income distribution saw its income grow by just 46 percent from 1979 to 2015 - while the top 1 percent saw its income grow by 242 percent over the same time period [2]. These economic strains within the United States will be a focus of the incoming Biden administration and it will likely hinder some aspects of full U.S. engagement in global affairs compared to previous eras, but that depends on how countries and institutions around the world respond.

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The global migration crisis is also a major factor contributing to the strains in the international system and particularly within democracies, including growing weaknesses and questions about the political legitimacy of political institutions at the national and international level. Some 272 million people were migrants in 2020, or 3.5 percent of the world population [3]. The failure to adequately address climate change contributes to this global migration crisis - it also makes it more expensive and more challenging to address climate change in the future.

The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic continues to reshape geopolitical dynamics in the international system, and the coming year will be transformative in the reordering of the international system. Most of the attention is on how the United States may re-emerge as a leader in this system and how it will relate to other global powers such as China and Russia in arenas such as East Asia and Europe.

The Euro-Mediterranean region re-emerges as a crucial crossroads

In the 2020s, the Euro-Mediterranean has re-emerged as a key region that will shape the overall international system. The broader trends in global politics described above will unfold in key regions of the world that often do not receive sufficient focused attention such as the Mediterranean region, which is becoming increasingly shaped by countries such as China, Russia, and others as the European Union and the United States deal with their own challenges [4]. The Mediterranean has been examined as a regional whole in a number of academic and historical works [5], but the region today is rarely examined in an inclusive, integrated way in geopolitics, even though the challenges across the Mediterranean Sea increasingly know no borders – climate change, migration, and geopolitical tensions between the world’s leading powers.

In 2020, southern Europe continued to experience waves of migration from Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia. Tensions in the waters of the Eastern Mediterranean and ongoing conflicts in Libya and Syria drew in Russia, Turkey, and several European countries such as France, as well as countries from the Gulf Cooperation Council such as the United Arab Emirates and Qatar. The continued challenges from climate change and the immediate health and economic effects of the coronavirus will add to the challenges in 2021 as the Biden administration enters office.

Given the interlinkage between the challenges in the Euro-Mediterranean region, the United States should think anew about how it engages the Mediterranean region with an eye to how to work more cooperatively with both southern Europe and northern Africa in a more integrated manner.

The Opportunity for Biden to Reset Overall U.S. Foreign Policy

Incoming U.S. President Joseph Biden is no stranger to foreign policy – he spent decades as a U.S. Senator and then later as Vice President in the Obama administration traveling the world and building a depth of knowledge and connections unrivalled in America today. Arguably, no U.S. president since George H.W. Bush, who served from 1989 to 1993, has as much prior experience about foreign affairs as Biden does. The team Biden has begun to assemble is well-known and their views hew closely to the long-standing traditions of U.S. foreign policy [6].

The Biden administration enters office with a long list of challenges on its policy agenda, topped by the coronavirus response, the economic fallout from the pandemic, and climate change. The early staffing moves as well as initial policy signals indicate that these items will top the agenda of the most senior officials. In the broader hierarchy of foreign policy issues, relations with China are likely to top the list of priorities, after climate change.

Biden has signaled three overarching issues that are likely to animate his foreign policy, at least in the first year:

I. A focus on renewing cooperation with traditional democratic partners. Biden has promised to “stand with our allies and friends” and “make it clear to our adversaries the days of cozying up to dictators are over” [7]. In an early 2020 *Foreign Affairs* essay, Biden argued the next president would “have to salvage our reputation, rebuild confidence in our leadership, and mobilize our country and our allies to rapidly meet new challenges” [8]. During and after his successful 2020 presidential campaign, President-elect Joe Biden repeatedly pledged “to make America respected around the world again” [9].

II. New diplomatic efforts at mobilizing collective action against global threats like climate change and pandemic diseases. This focus will likely require the Biden administration to adopt a more pragmatic and nuanced approach to ties with non-democratic countries such as China, even as the new administration places a premium on U.S. relations with democratic countries [1].

III. An emphasis on linking America’s economic strength at home with its foreign policy. The Biden administration is looking for ways to implement its “build back better” slogan from the campaign to strengthen America’s economy at home so it is better positioned to compete in the world. This renewed focus on competitiveness will keep thorny questions related to new technologies and competition as well as cooperation with countries like China in the spotlight, and higher educational institutions will remain at the center of this debate.

In many ways, the likely Biden foreign policy approach may appear quite conventional and represent a return to normalcy, particularly after four years of the Trump administration. But the Biden team also recognizes that past formulas for U.S. foreign policy are not likely to succeed because of the changes within the United States and the world. During the past quarter century, key parts of American society have come to view U.S. international involvement as undercutting America’s strength at home and contributing to inequalities that have grown during the coronavirus crisis.

As the United States invests in strengthening our country at home, it will need new models of global teamwork that will not be viewed as draining away resources and support for the national renewal that Biden hopes to implement at home. The circumstances in the international system have changed considerably, and to a large extent, the Biden team will likely follow an approach that recognizes that America’s future depends on a more constructive of international cooperation.

U.S. foreign policy will need to change to adapt its engagement with long-standing institutions and practices to these new circumstances. In the Mediterranean region, this means looking for new ways to engage with existing institutions like the Union for the Mediterranean as new avenues for U.S. foreign policy to build multilateral action in an emerging geopolitical context of complex multipolarity.

The Union for the Mediterranean's Opportunity to Focus its Priorities and Connect with Biden's Emerging Foreign Policy in the 2020s

The Mediterranean region today is a critical crossroads for many interlinked security challenges with global implications: climate change, migration, economic strains, and a complicated multipolar geopolitical competition increasingly drawing in regional actors and global powers such as Russia and China. The coronavirus pandemic has exacerbated these challenges in the Mediterranean region.

The Union of the Mediterranean (UfM), an intergovernmental organization formally established in 2008 currently with 42 member states (Syria's membership in UfM was suspended in 2011), is an organization that has its roots in a previous geopolitical era that has now passed, the post-Cold War period. The seeds for UfM were planted in 1995 when the Euro-Mediterranean Conference that launched the Barcelona Process between the member states of the European Union and twelve partners of the southern Mediterranean (Algeria, Cyprus, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Malta, Morocco, the Palestinian Authority, Syria, Tunisia and Turkey).

The start of this process, a quarter century ago, was motivated by a much different geopolitical landscape than is witnessed today. At the time, the countries involved were looking to proactively define the new geopolitical landscape with coordinated international initiatives. In the wake of the end of the Cold War and collapse of the Soviet Union, several European countries came together with their neighbors in the Mediterranean region in an effort to create a new zone for political, economic, and social cooperation among countries of the Mediterranean region. The vision of a Euro-Mediterranean Partnership was based in part by the principles and ethos that shaped and guided the Helsinki Declaration of 1975, to define a common area of peace and stability through ongoing dialogues based on respect for basic human rights. Another key component of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership was the idea of building economic, financial and commercial ties among the countries of the region. As concerns about migration grew in the first decades of the 21st century, this issue became a higher priority in the agenda of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership in 2005.

The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership never lived up to the hopes and expectations many of its founders and participants had for it, for a number of reasons. It fell short in producing tangible progress and results in the first decade of its existence, and began to face growing skepticism in Europe and among some Arab states, which boycotted the 2005 Euro-Mediterranean Summit. These mixed results motivated some countries, including France under President Nicholas Sarkozy, to look for ways to reinvigorate the forum and strengthen the linkage between Europe and Africa. These discussions resulted in the formal creation of the Union of the Mediterranean (UfM) on July 13, 2008 [11].

Despite this renewed focus, in the dozen years since the founding of the UfM, it has difficult to point to specific and tangible outcomes and successes of this forum. Dialogue and a

forum for regular exchanges of views is important, but it should not be considered an end in and of itself. The forums provided by the UfM structures have not translated into outcomes that have fundamentally shifted the political, economic and social trends across the region.

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One prime example of this came in the 2011 Arab uprisings – it is difficult to point to a success story from the Arab uprisings in which the UfM played a pivotal role. Similarly, the ongoing migration crises impacting European countries are now approaching a decade since the flow of migrants starting increasing. Ongoing conflicts in Syria and Libya, as well as the growing threat of climate change, raise the prospect that the Mediterranean region is just at the beginning of a longer phase of larger numbers of migrants seeking to travel towards Europe.

In this context – a Mediterranean region being buffeted by many of the same problems the UfM has discussed for years at a time when the United States and many European countries are facing several internal strains – presents a difficult set of challenges. But it is within these challenges that countries of the UfM should seek to define opportunities for engaging the new Biden administration and its efforts to re-engage key parts of the world while it addresses a daunting set of challenges at home.

The Union for the Mediterranean is one possible forum and avenue for the Biden administration to try to implement a revived internationalism and collaborative action through diplomacy as it seeks to revamp America's approach to the world. But for the UfM to be viewed as a practical and pragmatic forum for engagement, it will need to define with greater clarity the outcomes and actions it seeks to achieve in the long list of issues it was formed to address. U.S. re-engagement with the broader region is likely to center once again on larger multilateral institutions such as the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), as well as other groupings the incoming Biden team has discussed engaging such as a Summit of Democracies.

There is no shortage of issues that the UfM could aim to focus its top priorities on in 2021. If it is seeking greater U.S. engagement and attention under the Biden administration, it might look to these five issues as a means for starting a discussion on increased U.S. engagement in Mediterranean issues.

These four issues are by no means the only ones that should be under consideration – as the Mediterranean region presents a number of challenges and opportunities – but in order for it to be viewed as a viable and interesting venue for diplomacy, countries will need to make the case for its value. These issues are ones that will likely dominate the Biden

administration's agenda in the first year.

I. The regional coronavirus pandemic response. The most immediate challenge – the pandemic – may not fade as quickly as some wish. The hope provided by new vaccines at the end of 2020 will be met with the reality that it will take some time to deploy this vaccine. Furthermore, the 2020 COVID-19 crisis has already led to a deteriorating overall human security situation in the broader Mediterranean region. Even before the onset of the pandemic, Mediterranean countries were falling far short of meeting the Sustainable Development Goals outlined in the previous decade [12].

The Biden administration has signaled that a more effective pandemic response is its top policy priority, and it operates with the worldview that this challenge needs to be tackled globally. The United States will prioritize working with long-standing to share knowledge, make supply chains more resilient, and enhance preparedness for future pandemics. Moreover, the United States may look to use either existing groups like the G-7 or proposed gatherings like the D-10 [13] to bring together like-minded nations to better coordinate their responses to future pandemics. One area for potential cooperation involves the distribution of vaccines beyond the borders of advanced industrial democracies that look likely to develop and make them.

If the UfM or any other forum demonstrates it has the capacity to provide results in the area of the coronavirus response – including in supply chain security and vaccine deployment – it could be seen as an opportunity by the Biden administration for stepped up engagement.

II. Climate change. In announcing former U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry as his climate envoy, President Biden has signaled that international climate policy will be a top priority. The Biden administration will move quickly to re-enter the Paris Climate Agreement, but it will also look for ways to step up its engagement with as many countries as possible, and region-wide forums such as UfM could offer unique advantages.

Climate change represents “one of the most serious systemic challenges for this region” of the Mediterranean [14]. The recent trends in climate change have raised alarms. The Biden administration will be looking for partners around the world to present a more united front in climate negotiations with the likes of China. It will also seek out opportunities for joint green energy and climate mitigation projects, financed through an international climate research, development, and infrastructure fund.

III. The migration crisis. Linked to the global climate crisis as well as regional conflicts, the migration crisis that has impacted Europe and reshaped politics within many countries does not appear to be diminishing as a challenge anytime soon. In fact, climate change, pandemics, and new conflicts will likely exacerbate the migration challenge that many countries have faced over the past decade.

A number of dynamics are drawing Europe and Africa closer together [15], including security and economic trends, but the migration challenge is becoming wider and even

more complicated as conflicts and climate change remain unaddressed. Recent events indicate that the migration crisis is shifting in new ways – with migrants from sub-Saharan Africa seeking to avoid countries like Libya coming through new routes as European countries have increased their patrols of Mediterranean routes. Nearly 20,000 migrants reached the Canary Islands in 2020 traveling from Senegal via the Atlantic Ocean in attempts to reach Europe [16].

IV. Digital cooperation with key partners. COVID-19 has accelerated – and will continue to accelerate – the deployment of a wide range of existing technologies. E-commerce, remote working, online learning and telemedicine have all received a boost that will only partly dissipate after the pandemic crisis passes. Recent technological advances have great potential to increase the quality of life around the world, but they could also accelerate greater inequality, particularly in regions such as the Mediterranean [17].

The Biden administration is poised to look for ways to coordinate policies with coalitions of key allies and partners around the world on a wide range of digital policies, including digital taxation and regulatory coordination, semiconductor manufacturing, and 5G telecommunications infrastructure. A top priority of the incoming Biden administration will be to increase its digital diplomacy with like-minded partners in the world to address and compete with China's model of authoritarian digital capitalism and Russia's model of destructive political interference aimed at paralyzing open societies.

Many countries that are UfM members are the centerpiece of this struggle for freedom and democracy playing out in the digital realm, and this is another area that could prove to be important if the UfM and the United States were to look towards increased engagement.

These four issues are likely to dominate the overall Biden administration. There are a number of other important issues within the Mediterranean region – including the Israel-Palestine issue, conflicts in Libya and Syria, and recent tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean. But for the UfM to feature more prominent in a renewed U.S. diplomatic approach to the overall region, it will have to demonstrate a clearer program for addressing these sets of issues.

Conclusion

The Biden administration faces a long list of challenges and opportunities at home and abroad, and it is looking to reform the way the United States conducts its foreign policy as it turns the page from the Trump administration. Existing foreign policy structures in the U.S. government have led to artificial divisions between European and North African affairs in the State Department and Pentagon, and a new engagement strategy that includes the Union for the Mediterranean offers an opportunity for U.S. diplomats to engage current challenges in new and innovative ways. But for the UfM to be prioritized in U.S. diplomacy, it will need to pick a clear set of priorities linked to actions that are likely to produce more tangible outcomes than it has produced in the past quarter century.

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