

Opinion **Donald Trump**

## Why Joe Biden is the heir to Trump

The current administration has quietly built upon many Trump-era policies

**GIDEON RACHMAN**



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**Gideon Rachman** YESTERDAY

Donald Trump is a braggart and a liar. Donald Trump attempted to stage a coup. I think both those statements are true. But it is also true that, as president, Trump was responsible for historic shifts in US foreign and domestic policy that Joe Biden has built upon. Those shifts are likely to endure — even if Trump is sent to prison.

What makes a presidency truly historic? Essentially, it requires a radical break with the past — whose consequences and premises are then accepted and absorbed by your political opponents. Franklin Roosevelt did it with the New Deal. Lyndon Johnson did it with the Civil Rights Act. Ronald Reagan did it with the deregulating, tax-cutting policies, now commonly referred to as neoliberalism.

The presidents that came after Reagan basically accepted the free-market philosophy that he bequeathed. Bill Clinton pushed through the North American Free Trade Agreement. George W Bush welcomed China into the World Trade Organization. The Obama administration worked towards a US-China bilateral investment treaty and agreed the Trans-Pacific Partnership, a new trade deal.

Trump, however, repudiated the pro-globalisation consensus of the previous 40 years. On the campaign trail, he accused China of laughing at America and [raping](#) it. In his inaugural [address](#), he lamented the “American carnage” that he blamed on globalisation. Listening in the audience, Bush is said to have [muttered](#): “That was

globalisation. Listening in the audience, Bush is said to have [muttered](#): “That was some weird shit.”

On his first day in office, Trump pulled America [out](#) of the TPP. In 2017, the US made a deliberate effort to hobble the WTO by [blocking](#) the appointment of new judges to its appellate court. Robert Lighthizer, Trump’s trade representative, imposed a raft of tariffs on China. Trump also renegotiated Nafta, which was rebranded as the USMCA. All this was justified in the name of bringing industrial jobs back to the US.

The new rivalry with China was also geopolitical. The Trump administration’s national security strategy, announced in 2017, made “[great-power competition](#)” with China and Russia the centrepiece of its approach to the world.

And what has Biden done with all this “weird shit”? Rather than shovel it to one side, his administration has retained most of these Trump-era policies — and even built on them. It made no attempt to rejoin the TPP and continues to block the WTO’s appellate court. In private, some administration officials say that it was a mistake ever to let China join the WTO. Trump’s tariffs on China are still in place.

This administration has also embraced the concept of great-power rivalry with China. Biden’s own National Security strategy [describes](#) China as the “most consequential” geopolitical challenge for America.

“Bidenomics”, the president’s ambitious and interventionist economic policies, are driven by a Trump-like desire to reindustrialise America and rebuild the middle class.

The Biden team would argue, with some justice, that its policies are more systematic than those of the Trump administration and contain some new elements. The emphasis on encouraging clean energy and fighting climate change is distinctively Democratic.

Biden’s efforts to contain Chinese power are also less vulnerable to presidential caprice. Trump tended to excoriate China with one breath and heap praise on China’s leader, Xi Jinping, with the next. He probably saw his tariffs as a means to eventually negotiate a better trade deal with China, until the pandemic threw all efforts to improve relations with Beijing off course.

The Biden administration is less narrowly focused on the US-China trade balance, and is making a more systematic effort to restrict the export of key technologies to China. Biden’s team can also claim to have put far more money into efforts to reindustrialise the US than Trump did.

But these are largely differences in implementation rather than underlying philosophy. Much as they would be loath to admit it, the Biden team has come to share many of Trump's basic assumptions — about trade, globalisation and rivalry with China.

Two factors have driven this reassessment. First, Trump's victory in 2016 forced Democrats to take the plight and anger of US workers much more seriously. The Biden administration has concluded that it can no longer sell globalisation to the American people. Without an effort to address the economic drivers of Trumpism, democracy itself may be in peril. So Biden's team has finally abandoned the free-trading nostrums embraced by Bill Clinton's "New Democrats" in the 1990s.

The Biden administration also believes, as Trump argued, that 40 years of US policy towards China have in effect failed, and that a China led by the Communist party will never be a "responsible stakeholder" in the international system.

In important respects, therefore, Trump brought about a lasting revolution in US foreign and domestic policy.

It may seem strange — even repulsive — to give him credit for serious shifts in ideology and policy. For many in Washington, Trump is a barbarian, whose defining legacy will always be his assault on the American democratic system. But perhaps it needed a taboo-breaking barbarian to engineer such a decisive break with a 40-year-old consensus on trade, globalisation and China.

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