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Biden as Host: US Politics of Climate Summitry

By Adam Garfinkle

SYNOPSIS

The recent US-led Climate Summit illustrates the interwoven complexities of American politics at three levels.

COMMENTARY

GLOBAL POLITICS is increasingly polarised between forms of Caesarist authoritarianism and forms of liberal democracy, with many Asian countries stuck somewhere between the poles defined in common perception by China and America. Polarisation exists as well within the liberal-democratic world between forms of hyper-nationalist populism and traditional rule-of-law constitutionalism, especially in the United States.

Moreover, a subtler form of polarisation exists within the US Democratic Party between centrists and “woke” or “progressive” Democrats who, in a European context, would be indistinguishable from democratic socialists. The interconnectedness of the three levels forces President Joe Biden to conduct a three-dimensional juggling act:

US Domestic Politics & Biden’s 3-D Juggling Act

Biden’s domestic political act juggles the following three fronts: On the global stage to manage relations among allies so to deal effectively with adversaries; on the national stage lest failure enable regression to a Trumpist America come 2022 and 2024; and within his own party, lest the opposition to his Left feed raw meat to the Republicans and complicate relations abroad.

Policy and politics have never been entirely separate in America, but these days no blue sky separates the two. Politics is primary on both the domestic and international

levels: lose these political games, both increasingly conceptualised as existential and zero-sum, and pondering fine points of policy becomes moot. Environmental policy is a key case in point, as preparations for and reactions to the US-led Climate Summit of April 22-23 illustrate.

“Climate change” has become irremediably politicised within the United States in recent years, which is no surprise: After all, if mask-wearing in a pandemic can be politicised, anything can.

The Democratic Party, fairly characterised since the mid-1990s as a coalition weighted towards culture-war activists, now ranks “climate change” as the pre-eminent litmus test of ideological fidelity within the party. As part of the secular catechism of the Left, it inevitably elicits howls of derision and counter-mobilisation on the Right; the clickbait-oriented American commercial electronic media magnifies the clash to deafening levels, leaving the majority of centrist and sensible Americans bewildered, frustrated, and alienated from the political system.

Biden the Consummate Politician

Biden, the consummate political man, understands this. He must pay deference to the “climate change” church in his own party or lose the ability to manage his Left flank. But he dare not lurch into apocalyptic language or his critical effort to win back working-class white support for the Democrats will be doomed. He judges that focusing the optic on environmental issues, but without going over-the-top rhetorically, will play well in national politics.

And he knows that climate issues resonate loudly among most US allies, especially in Europe, and therefore become an adhesive to greater cooperation and restored US prestige as Washington works out how to lead the West against an increasingly leverage-rich and assertive China.

That understanding explains how we ended up with a 40-nation “virtual-in-the-time-of-COVID” Climate Summit within the Biden administration’s first hundred days. Most relevant assistant secretaries and their deputies have yet to find their desks, substantive policy reviews can only barely have begun, and the sherpas could not possibly have readied actual deliverables for a major international summit — but it mattered not.

In politically saturated circumstances, public relations optics overwhelm evolving policy substance. The performance had to be staged and staged soon, lest anyone think Biden’s a “caretaker” administration with no bandwidth for foreign policy. And so it was.

The Climate Summit

The Summit did the trick where it mattered most: domestically. Biden’s dramatic, ante-upping Summit declaration that the US will halve its CO₂ output by 2030 occasioned a politically ideal schizophrenic reaction. End-of-world type environmentalists now believe that Biden, his return to Paris, his Summit and his pledge, are the best things since the invention of tofu.

Rightwing GOP loons have claimed it is part of the “socialist” globalist plot to destroy freedom and enslave non-“ethnic” Americans, all perpetrated by a “fake president” who did not really win the election. They have said so to general embarrassment as far as most Americans are concerned.

Neither skein of irrationalism seems to know or care that US emissions have been on a declining trajectory anyway because of relative de-industrialisation, the market-driven substitution of less-polluting energy sources, and demographic trends. Getting to “half” by 2030 may or may not be achieved, but it is not that far-fetched a target.

Out of range of Summit klieg lights, the administration actually has a real, substantive policy forming to deal with emissions and environment. It is called respectively ARPA-C, based on an organisation called ARPA-E created in 2007, which in turn was modelled on DARPA, the Defence Advanced Research Projects Agency.

If the US achieves Biden’s 2030 goal, it will be because these plans for innovation get funded properly and work, not because of US re-accession to the Paris Treaty or late April’s virtual-photo-op Summit.

The International Fallout: Summit a Flop?

On the global level, the Summit was a flop. No new pledges on carbon emissions came from Australia, India, Indonesia, Mexico, or Russia. If these and other countries intend new pledges they are saving them for the UN’s November Glasgow climate meeting.

Most developing countries, meanwhile, expressed something between disappointment and derision at the US financial assistance offered them, scored by experts as a tiny fraction of what agreed Paris targets require.

But that was inevitable: Washington policymakers have known since the Kyoto Accords era that little of the US money turned over to poorer countries for emissions abatement would be spent as pledged. That disconnect was a political annoyance in the past; now it’s downright toxic at a time of domestic economic uncertainty.

Now nearly all seemingly foreign policy initiatives bearing a price tag are linked to US domestic policy preferences. That’s how the Democrats would torque the Federal budget to do what they desire but draw less political drag against it.

Here, however, lies opportunity for Singapore in the form of R&D fusion cells with the US on energy and climate innovation. Offices in Washington are brimming with new labels, but little substance: The first contributors who knock on the door with something practical in hand are almost guaranteed a warm and enriching welcome.

Implications for Southeast Asia

The broader regional implications of the Summit for Southeast Asia are close to nil — and that’s because of China’s reaction to it.

Xi Jinping “attended” the Summit and, as is his wont with US presidents, made a series of doubtful statements. He admitted that China is still building new coal-fired plants

but claimed that China's emissions will peak in 2030, and achieve net-zero emissions by 2060; this is a target so far away that merely stating it illustrates its propagandistic origin.

Coal, he promised, will "phase down" after 2025 — even though the operational life of newly constructed plants will extend long after that. Even if China's emissions increase for only nine more years to 2030, it will dwarf the 50% reductions the US and the EU combined may achieve by then.

Meanwhile, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi chided from the side, in Wolf Warrior cadence, the US return to Paris as a case of a returned "truant". He added linkage: Chinese cooperation over climate depended on the US attitude toward Beijing's policies toward Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Xinjiang. He did not mention the South China Sea; he did not have to.

None of this bothered former Secretary of State John Kerry, now Biden's climate policy czar who used his stature and high-powered rolodex to arrange the Summit quickly, and took the lead in dizzying the media with post-Summit spin. The day after adjournment Kerry smiled and pronounced the Summit a good first step, toward more diplomacy.

More important, the underwhelming achievement of the Summit did not seem to bother the powerful *activiste* environmental rump inside the Democratic Party. To the extent they even noticed the generally paltry international harvest, and particularly the acerbic Chinese response, it just made China a more deplorable "bad guy". That's good politics, too. Nice juggling, Joe.

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