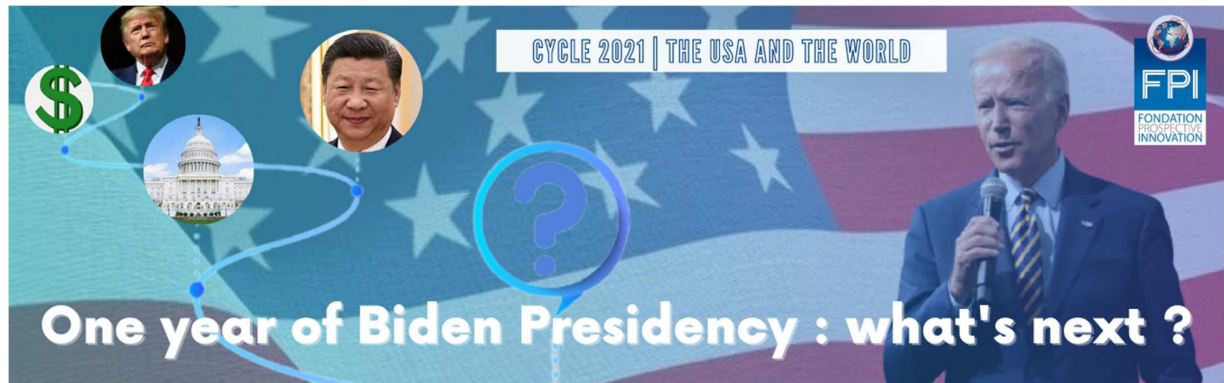


## Webinar Report



A year ago, Joe Biden took office in the Oval Office after a tense election in an American society that has rarely been so divided. The return of the Democrats to power heralded a return to normalcy and stability after four years of a Trump presidency marked by unpredictable initiatives and flip-flops. The challenges facing the newly elected President were numerous : reconciling a fractured population, containing a violent health crisis, maintaining a healthy economy, and restoring the confidence of Washington's traditional partners. To do this, he had major advantages : high popularity (among Democrats at least), a majority in Congress and a competent administration.

Twelve months later, however, the first failures and obstacles have appeared. In this respect, the mid-term elections appear to be both decisive and uncertain. So, what is the outcome of this first year in office and what are the prospects for the next three years ?

The Prospective and Innovation Foundation has set out to analyze the questions that weigh on the future of a presidency whose success will be decisive for the world's largest democracy. Moderated by Jean-Pierre RAFFARIN, former Prime Minister and President of the Foundation, the webinar "One year of Biden Presidency : what's next ?" concludes a year of reflection and monitoring of this first year of the mandate. On this occasion, Clémence LANDERS, Policy Fellow at the Center for Global Development, Hall GARDNER, Professor at the American University of Paris, and Olivier PITON, Attorney at Law at the Paris and Washington Bars, Counselor for the French Abroad (United States) were able to deliver their analysis.

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### ***A fleeting moment of grace***

With more than 81 million votes cast in the 2020 presidential election, Joe Biden is the president elected with the most votes in the history of the United-States. It was therefore with an unprecedented voter turnout that Americans decided to end Donald Trump's term. Biden came to power with the wind in his sails, his popularity representing significant political capital. Faced with the economic emergency caused by the pandemic, the new President decided on an ambitious response, thereby avoiding the same mistake as in 2009, when the overly timid stimulus package was criticized by Keynesians as a factor that exacerbated the difficulties. President Biden cannot be accused of doing too little: after a \$1.9 trillion emergency plan in March 2021 to deal with the aftermath of Covid-19, a \$1.2 trillion infrastructure investment plan was passed by the House of Representatives in November of the same year (which is supposed to be complemented by a \$1.75 trillion Build Back Better Act currently stalled in the Senate), pending a third round of education and health reforms.

By making economic recovery his priority, Biden has thus shown himself to be faithful to his socially oriented program. With an administration that is representative of society and universally regarded as competent, the momentum seemed to be building. But 2021 was a rollercoaster year for the President, and his popularity quickly eroded in the face of the difficult exercise of power.

### ***A society on the verge of implosion***

The first difficulty Joe Biden faced was undoubtedly a particularly fractured society. His mandate had not even begun when the Capitol, temple of national democracy, was taken over by overexcited Trumpist militants. And if the President enjoyed a high popularity rating among Democrats, that was without taking into account the lowest rating a head of state can have among Republicans. This distrust of a whole part of America was thus reflected in the particularly vivid anti-vax trend that weakened his successful management of the health crisis until then. As a result, barely 62% of the eligible population is vaccinated, a proportion that is stagnating with all that this implies in terms of saturation of the health system.

This political, economic and racial divide that runs through America has even led some observers to speak of a "new Civil War": between the Democrats and the Republicans, between the coastal areas and the rural center. Joe Biden is not responsible for this "American disease", but he has not been able to stop it either. The rise of the wokist theses, a nebulous term for the new proponents of progressivism, only accentuates the aggressiveness of the debate and the mutual excommunication.

This will have consequences for the November 2022 mid-term elections. Joe Biden risks losing his already fragile majority. In the Senate, Vice President Kamala Harris' vote is often decisive, and in the House of Representatives, the lead is short. The prospect of a Republican-dominated Congress would be a serious obstacle to Biden's continuation in office, negating any ability to reform over the next two years.

### ***Foreign policy : symbols contradicted by actions***

However, the growing mistrust of the President is rooted in a foreign policy decision. Paradoxically, there is a bipartisan consensus in Congress that the United States should take a firmer stance towards its rivals. Indeed, the disastrous withdrawal from Afghanistan, of which the catastrophic evacuation of Kabul airport was the symbol, has created a real unease in American society and undermined national confidence in the Biden administration. Worse, the willingness of the latter to open a dialogue with the Taliban has not helped matters. This event coincides with Joe Biden's drop in the opinion polls.

Europe, a traditional ally, has also begun to question the direction of American foreign policy. The beginning of the term in office was, however, a good omen for the normalization of relations between the two continents, which have been badly treated under Donald Trump. President Biden signed the return of the United States to the Paris Climate Agreement on his first day in the White House, reaffirmed his commitment to NATO, and emphasized the place that the EU would have to occupy in discussions with Iran, China and Russia. But the symbols were not enough and actions did not follow. Worse, Joe Biden seemed to repeat some of the unilateral failings of his predecessor. The breaking of the contract for the purchase of submarines by Australia from France to the benefit of the United States is a good illustration, giving rise to the feeling in Paris that cooperation was not effective when it came to arms sales. Washington now finds itself at a crossroads: the willingness to respect the European word will have to become a reality if Uncle Sam wishes to regain the confidence of his allies.

### ***"America is back"***

However, a break has appeared in the international doctrine of the United States regarding world governance. Instead of the unpredictable unilateralism of his predecessor, Joe Biden has preferred to return to discussions with the great powers of the world. The desire to reach a new agreement on the Iranian nuclear issue, dialogue with China despite its reaffirmed support for Taiwan, renewal of a treaty on strategic weapons with Russia while promising stronger sanctions if it invades Ukraine: "America is back" is essentially the message delivered to rival powers. The pitfall of such a strategy, however, lies in the accusations of weakness made against Joe Biden, and the National Defense Act (NDAA) passed by Congress for the year 2022 significantly restricts the executive branch's ability to deal with Beijing or Moscow.

From then on, a question emerges: will the United States seek to impose world peace by force by relying on a limited number of partners such as NATO, Japan, Australia and India, or will it succeed in developing a pluralist diplomacy that is sufficiently flexible and broad to counter the emergence of illiberal powers? If multilateralism appears more than ever to be a moral and political necessity, the challenge lies in the creation of tools that would support it. The establishment of contact groups between the United States and the EU in certain sensitive regions appears to be an interesting option in this respect. Such an effort would make it possible, in particular, to prevent migrations that directly feed xenophobic and nationalist passions in the West and thus threaten the foundation of liberal democracy. Africa would be one of these areas of cooperation. But the constitution of a US/EU axis should not be done against Russia and China:

on the contrary, these two powers should be fully integrated into these "regional communities of peace and sustainable development" if we want them to succeed.

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The Biden Presidency has mixed results and an uncertain future, both domestically and internationally. Europe must therefore return to a position of balance, combining strategic partnership with its old ally and openness to dialogue with all. With the United States, the Old Continent will have to play its full part in the front of democracies initiated by Biden to combat the rise of violence. With China, it will have to build a shared approach to the development of the African continent. This "solidary sovereignty" seems to offer two prospects for the future of Europe in order to consolidate its role as a pivot in global governance.

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