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Opinion

US election: the world is waiting for Biden to beat Trump and change the course of US foreign policy



- The two-act plot of November's presidential election must play out before US foreign policy can reboot, leading to an enervating waiting game
- The best that even thoughtful US observers can do for now is to wait for whoever or whatever is to come, as few dare to predict beyond November

Tom Plate

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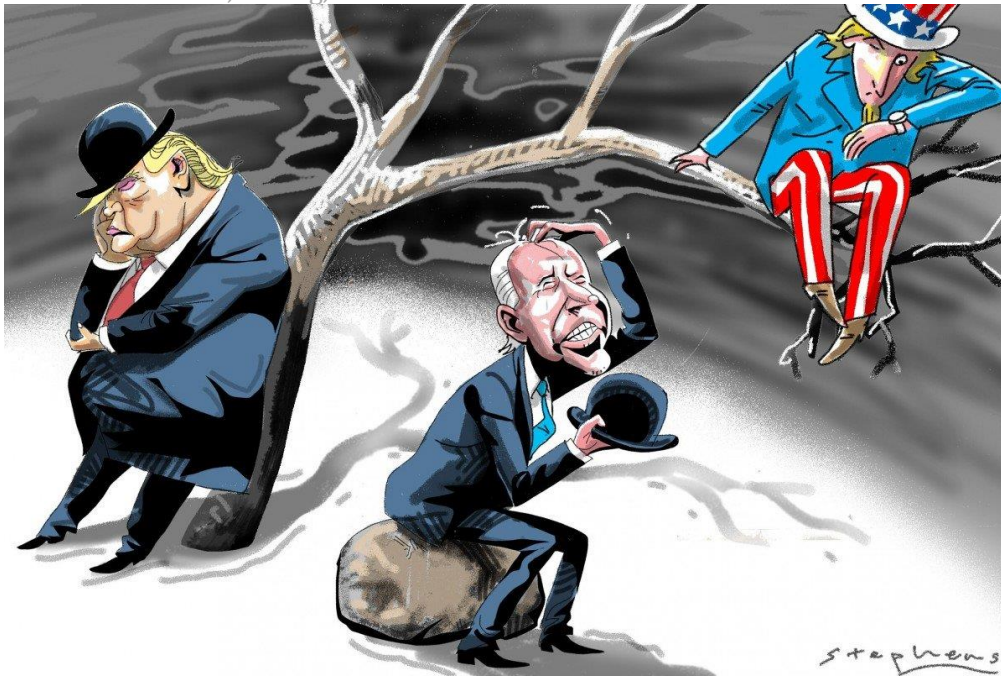


Illustration: Craig Stephens

Almost everyone is waiting, but waiting for what? We are trying to imagine that it's really not as bad as it seems. The Zoom boom, after all, lifts some of the gloom. The other day, I found myself in successive internet meetings but nice and relaxed in little more than a gardener's garb.

Except for the occasional audio blip or focus flicker, the screen sessions – though lacking the ineffable feel of human touch – sufficed. The usual annoying interruptions and talking over each other were minimised; one could complete whole sentences, sometimes a slew of them. Maybe this technology somehow gets us down to business by cutting out some of the nonsense?

Last week, a pair of confidential trans-Pacific teleconferences came up on my work list that had similar endings. One hooked into a private conference originating from Seoul; the other starred a sharp woman in Beijing.

The former, attended by policy heavyweights, focused on the dilemma of the two Koreas and the United States. The other, with a smaller group from Beijing, asked what US-China policy will be like in a different administration. At both, everyone was waiting – as if waiting for Godot.

Remember that renowned play by Samuel Beckett? Minimalist art at its most minimal, the play's spare two-act plot revolves around two guys waiting for someone named Godot to arrive. That reminded me of last week's meetings. In both, the same exact phrase surfaced: "Of course, we're all just waiting..."

The world is waiting not for Godot, of course, but for Biden – Joe Biden, the probable opposition candidate for the Democratic Party. We say "probable" only because nothing is certain until it's a fact. Will the low-key former vice-president dethrone President Donald Trump, the larger-than-life nightmare that haunts our political stage? Or does the king get crowned again and America's soul further crushed?

The two-act plot of this crucial election – the official party nominations are coming soon, the national election in November – must play out before the course of US foreign policy can begin to reboot. It's an enervating waiting game.

Perhaps Beijing, at its most uncomfortable when America is at its most unpredictable, understands this well enough to keep its expectations low. Perhaps it can slip through the summer with only a few irritating South China Sea escapades and just wait things out. Many Americans would appreciate that.

If Trump is ejected by American voters, it's clear his exit won't be graceful or quiet. I cringed when top Hong Kong officials were hit with US economic and travel sanctions, even though, as the most devoted reader knows, I am far from a fan of Chief Executive Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor.

Even so, she doesn't deserve this from Trump, of all people. How deeply embarrassing to see Uncle Sam's foot so far up in his mouth. Over the decades, US foreign policy has embraced foreign leaders who make Lam look like a saint.

Americans chafe when they have to wait. Two of our sharper foreign policy thinkers are Richard Haass, head of the Council on Foreign Relations, and Robert Zoellick, an official under various Republican presidents. Both have books, carefully written and well informed, that deserve to be read, but the most telling part may be their titles: *The World: A Brief Introduction* by Haass and *America in the World: A History of US Diplomacy and Foreign Policy* by Zoellick.

Is it just me who senses the geopolitical conceit, unintentional or otherwise, of the continued American touting of pre-eminence? Every instinct tells us that whatever that new world order will be, it is not going to be like it was. Thoughtful foreign-policy intellectuals such as Haass and Zoellick know better, of course, and in one way or another say so in their books.

But they go little further than that precisely because they cannot see much beyond November's election. Haass and Zoellick are not unlike Beckett's lead characters Vladimir and Estragon – the best they can do for the time being is to wait for whoever or whatever is to come.

In the past, America thought itself the head of the global parade, the leading secular saint of world order. That worked well enough until blunders reigned, and then the world started asking embarrassing questions. When the clever Obama crowd came in, they shifted to "leading from behind" – realistic but uninspiring.

Like Covid-19, about which we seem to know less than we thought, an American political virus seems to be stewing, too. A recent *London Review of Books* essay inserted this tragicomic touch into a recreation of May in

America: “Internal White House documents predict three thousand American deaths by the end of May. The president tweets: ‘Getting great reviews finally, on how well we are handling the pandemic’.” The article’s author, Eliot Weinberger, then tacks on: “He [the president] retweets that the Trump Turnberry golf course has been named by Golf World magazine the best golf course in the UK and Ireland for 2020.”

“There’s nothing we can do,” Beckett’s Vladimir says. Even so, they waited for Godot – as, in our own time and way, so do we. Zoom can only take us so far.

Professor Tom Plate is Loyola Marymount University's Distinguished Scholar of Asian and Pacific Affairs and the Pacific Century Institute's vice-president



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Tom Plate is a university professor and a veteran columnist focused on Asia and America. This Distinguished Scholar of Asian and Pacific Studies at Loyola Marymount University has orchestrated live interactive seminars with major universities across Asia, as part of the LMU’s path-finding Asia Media International Centre. He is also the author of 13 books, including the bestsellers “Confessions of an American Media Man” (2007) and four volumes in the “Giants of Asia” series. His latest is Yo-Yo Diplomacy: An American Columnist Tackles The Ups-and-Downs Between China and the US (2017).