



Joe Biden: A Realist Cold War Liberal

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Joe Biden was selected as Barack Obama's vice presidential candidate largely because of his expertise in foreign policy. Traditionally, in U.S. politics, Dick Cheney-like strong vice presidents are exception, not the rule. It is wiser to focus on Obama's foreign policy outlook rather than Biden's, which would benefit Turkey in the long run with its realistic tendencies. Biden's voting pattern, as it is displayed in three different issues (Cyprus-Armenian Issue-Iraq) does not seem friendly to the Turkish position. However, Biden as a statesman would not create extra problems for Turkey at the expense of U.S national interests. In all of these issues, the person that should be watched carefully is Obama, not Biden. Spending more energy to analyze Obama's geopolitical priorities can benefit Turkey in the long run.

Presidential elections in the U.S. always draw attention from the world because of their potential to create new tensions, change balances and shift policies. Turkey is one of the countries that has been carefully observing the positions of presidential and vice-presidential candidates regarding contentious issues such as Armenian Genocide claims, the possible partition of Iraq, Cyprus, and broader issues related to the Balkans, the Black Sea, the Caucasus and the Middle East. With the emergence of Senator Barack Obama, a politician who identifies the events of 1915 as genocide and who advocates a phased withdrawal from Iraq, as the democratic presidential candidate, Turkey turns its focus to the potential vice-presidential candidates, hoping that the second powerful political figure would balance Obama's policy preferences which have been perceived as against the Turkish position. Nevertheless, Obama's choice of the veteran Delaware senator Joseph

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Robinette Biden Jr. has disappointed Turkish politicians, policy makers and diplomats. Joseph Biden, whose Senate career spans thirty-five years, has become known for his pro-Armenian, pro-Greek ideas and voting record, and is also famous for his proposal of the “Biden Plan” – a plan that defends a soft-partition in Iraq. Turkey had crucial reserves about this plan and finds it unacceptable. Considering the political careers and positions of the democratic candidates, if the Obama-Biden ticket makes its way to the White House, how will this team affect Turkish-American relations? How should Turkey react to the positions the team holds?

Biden’s Career and Political Position

To begin with, it is almost a conventional wisdom that 2008 presidential elections will be a foreign policy election. Joe Biden, one of the 2008 presidential hopefuls just a couple of months ago, contributes to Obama’s career on this issue as a foreign policy expert. Biden completes some of Obama’s weaknesses with his

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private life and political career. As a Catholic, white politician, Biden’s seniority and his extensive knowledge on foreign policy issues makes him a vital catch for Obama. In his long

career, Biden has generally followed the voting pattern of the George McGovern-Ted Kennedy wing of the Democratic Party, i.e. the liberal left. However, as a “cold-war liberal” who supported harsh policies against Soviets, Biden did not refrain from voting yes to military interventions whether it seemed humanitarian or not. This makes him a trusted politician in the eyes of the Washington insiders, or establishment; in fact, he is one of the standard-bearers of the establishment.

In his career, Biden voted yes to the invasion of Iraq to overthrow the so-called inhumane Saddam regime even though he later changed his position and became a fierce critic of the invasion. Biden’s voting record and political career proves that Biden is a realist in his foreign policy preferences rather than a moralist or liberal; in other words, even though he favors humanitarian positions, Biden sees issues as a balance of power, not merely a calculus of moral preferences. Another important aspect that is extremely significant for our discussion is Biden’s close relations with the ethnic lobbies present in the U.S. Although sometimes harshly criticized, Biden has maintained enduring and very supportive relations with Greek, Armenian, Israeli and even the new emerging Kurdish lobbies. As long as it does not clash with national security issues, Biden votes in line with those ethnic lobbies.



However, it would be wrong to portray Biden as dependent on ethnic lobbies; rather, he gives priority to American interests¹.

The Cyprus Issue

Senator Biden was elected to the U.S. Senate in 1973 at the age of 29, and found himself facing Turkey's intervention in Cyprus. This was the time in which the politically divided and socially dispersed Greek community in the U.S. began to form what later came to be called the Greek lobby.² The Cyprus controversy merged Biden's career with the rise of this new lobby and made him work with leading figures in the lobby including Senator Thomas Eagleton of Missouri and Congressmen John Brademas of Indiana, Paul Sarbanes of Maryland and

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Benjamin Rosenthal of New York. In return, throughout his career, Biden has felt the support of the powerful Greek lobby in Washington. In his 35 years in the Senate, Biden has been one of the key figures behind the resolutions energized and

provoked by the Greek-American lobby, which has managed to halt or delay arm sales to Turkey. Working closely with Greek-origin senator Paul Sarbanes, Biden came to be known as a valued member of the pro-Greece lobby.

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In the beginning of his career, in fierce opposition to the Turkish intervention in Cyprus, Senator Biden supported the U.S. weapons embargo against Turkey, which passed the U.S. Congress in the fall of 1974. However, in 1978, during the Carter administration when the president asked him (and others) to vote to lift the embargo, worrying that Turkish armed forces were deteriorating, which would weaken the southern flank of NATO, and that the U.S. stood in need of military bases in Turkey, which enabled the U.S. to monitor Soviet activities, Biden did not resist the President. It is therefore clear that Biden has consistently chosen the pro-

¹ Bülent Ali Rıza, “Obama'nın Başkanlığı Türkiye'yi Nasıl Etkiler?,” Interview with Anatolian Agency, 27 August, 2008.

² “New Lobby in Town: The Greeks,” *Time Magazine*, July, 14, 1975.

Greek position only when it does not clash with U.S. national interests, as in the case of the weapons embargo. Biden's position on arm sales to Turkey reappeared in November 2000. When Turkey wanted to buy eight CH-53E Super Stallion heavy-lift attack helicopters from the U.S, Biden placed a hold on the sales. As a ranking member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Biden's reason was again the Cyprus issue. Nevertheless, under heavy pressure from the administration, he quickly changed his position and lifted the hold on the helicopter sale. Biden, then, supported Cyprus's ascension to EU, even though the Greek Cypriots voted against the Annan Plan.

Armenian Claims

Another important issue that worries Turkish policy-makers is Biden's consistent support for Armenian Genocide claims. Beginning in 1990, Biden actively supported almost all the pro-Armenian resolutions in the Senate. Those resolutions included aid to Armenia, political support for the invasion of Karabagh by the Armenians, opening the Turkish side of the Turkish-Armenian border, genocide claims, the appointment of ambassadors to Armenia, Hrant Dink's assassination, article 301 etc. Even though Biden seemed pro-Armenian, however, he did not refrain from changing his positions and votes when he felt that the vote was against the national interests of the United States.

Biden supported the resolution that seeks the recognition of Armenian Genocide claims by the president in 1990. In 1992, he supported the Freedom Support Act

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that aimed to restrict U.S. Assistance to Azerbaijan. His voting pattern has followed this course throughout. In May 2006, when U.S. Ambassador to Armenia, John Evans, used the word 'genocide' to describe the events of 1915, in opposition to official

U.S. policy, he was forced to resign. Biden was among the leading senators who wrote a very strong letter to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in favor of Evans, urging Rice to reconsider her policy. Senator Biden, at that time, argued that the final goal of the claims of genocide is not U.S recognition of genocide claims, but rather to make Turkey recognize the events of 1915 as genocide. In 2007, he opposed Richard Hoagland's appointment to Yerevan to replace Evans as Ambassador. During the Senate hearings, Hoagland refused to use the word genocide to describe the events. Biden delayed the committee vote on Hoagland,



but eventually voted in his favor. Again in 2007, Biden cosponsored the Armenian Genocide Resolution (S.Res.106) and authored a resolution to honor Turkish-Armenian journalist Hrant Dink. Eventually, after the negotiations, Biden accepted the proper changes in the resolutions' language to a degree that does not disturb the official Turkish position³. Finally, in 2008, Biden urged the new appointment of Marie Yovanovitch as an Ambassador to replace Evans. Even though he questioned Yovanovitch's position, and criticized her non-preference of the word genocide, he did not use his veto power to block the appointment. These voting patterns support the idea that Biden makes a clear distinction between his personal political position and the national interests of the U.S.

Iraq: Soft Partition or Exit Strategy?

One of the most important contributions Biden may make to U.S. politics is his exit plan from Iraq, which urges the establishment of "three largely autonomous regions with a viable central government in Baghdad" that are Kurd, Sunni and Shiite⁴. Based on Leslie Gelb's 2004 "three-state solution" article⁵, this plan was

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prepared and perfected by Biden and Gelb. The so-called "Biden Plan," sometimes referred to as "soft-partition," restricts Baghdad's function to a federal zone that mainly deals with three issues: national defense, foreign relations, and the distribution of oil money. The plan was crafted at a time when the U.S. situation in

Iraq seemed hopeless, with the highest number of casualties and the country on the brink of civil war. Modeled according to the Dayton Accord, the Biden Plan argued that the only way to stop the violence was to divide the country into three autonomous zones with a federal and weak capital. As an alternative to Bush's position of "staying the course," as well as to the liberal imperative "bring the troops home now!" the Biden Plan offered a third, middle-way alternative. Had the plan been adopted, U.S. troops would have been redeployed or withdrawn from

³ For the rewritten text of the resolution: http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=110_cong_bills&docid=f:sr65rs.txt.pdf

⁴ Joseph Biden and Leslie H. Gelb, "Unity Through Autonomy in Iraq," *New York Times*, May 1, 2006

⁵ Leslie H. Gelb, "Three-State Solution," *New York Times*, November 25 2003.



Iraq by 2008. Rather than being seen as the most complicated and refined strategy, the Biden Plan was an exit strategy that the U.S. needed at the time.

The Biden Plan was widely discussed in Washington as a third way and as a plausible exit strategy. In fact, the only problem with the plan was it was more popular in Washington than in Baghdad. Drawing sharp criticism from Iraqi politicians and Iraq's neighbors – including Turkey and Iran – the plan was never taken seriously and was dismissed by the related interlocutors. At the height of the search for new direction and need for a new strategy, Iraqi Study Group funded by the Congress and led by veteran diplomats James Baker and Lee Hamilton, assessed the Biden plan and concluded that “The cost would be too high”⁶. The plan disturbed Turkey, supported anti-American feelings in Turkey, and was seen as an evidence of U.S. intentions to remain over-involved in the region both in Iraq and in Turkey. When George W. Bush’s “surge strategy,” that strongly committed to territorial integrity of Iraq, worked out well in Iraq to reduce violence there, even Biden himself did not propose his plan again⁷. During his presidential bid, he used the plan to display his difference from the other democratic candidates. However, especially after September 2007, he was careful not to bring the plan into the front. In fact, the website devoted to the plan is not available anymore and the plan is hidden from the eyes in Biden’s own website. Now, Biden’s plan for Iraq is no different than Barack Obama’s “phased withdrawal” plan that urges the U.S. not to withdraw abruptly, which would lead to a regional war that could continue for generations. Instead, Biden proposes a 16-month plan, starting from inauguration day, to withdraw the combat brigades to redeploy them in Afghanistan. He also advocates leaving some brigades for training, operational, and intelligence purposes. As different from Obama, Biden opposes permanent U.S. bases in Iraq.

Conclusion

1. Joe Biden was selected as Barack Obama’s vice presidential candidate largely because of his expertise in foreign policy. His function is to balance Obama’s so-called inexperience in foreign policy. The logic behind the selection process does not aim to reshape U.S. foreign policy but rather to play out the internal political dynamics of the U.S. Therefore it is not

⁶ The Iraqi Study Group Report, p. 39. Vintage Books, New York, December 2006. The reasons of the objection were possible “mass population movements, collapse of the Iraqi security forces, strengthening of militias, ethnic cleansing, destabilization of neighboring states, or attempts by neighboring states to dominate Iraqi regions.”

⁷ The last time the plan was discussed through the Biden’s non-binding resolution that passed the Senate on September 26, 2007 with a bipartisan support 76-23 including Sen. Hillary Clinton formal and Sen. Barack Obama’s verbal support who missed the vote. (<http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/z?c110:S.CON.RES.37:>).



realistic to exaggerate Biden's potential influence on a possible Obama presidency⁸.

2. Traditionally, in U.S. politics, Dick Cheney-like strong vice presidents are exception, not the rule. If elected, Biden will take responsibilities when it is seen as appropriate by Obama. The president makes the hardest decision on his own, even if this president is George W. Bush as it is seen in Annapolis process, engagement with Iran and Iraq strategy. Therefore, it is wiser to focus on Obama's foreign policy outlook rather than Biden's, which would benefit Turkey in the long run with its realistic tendencies.
3. In the U.S. public administration, the Vice President is not the person who makes the decisions on foreign policy issues. Following the President, the Secretary of Defense, the Secretary of State and National Security Adviser have more power and authority in shaping the foreign policy. Even though Biden is a strong character with expertise in foreign policy, it will be virtually impossible for him to make those critical decisions by himself. It will be a better strategy to wait for the names of those who will fill out those mentioned positions and, in the meantime, to focus on Obama's general positions. Those possible names should be carefully followed and their positions should be studied.
4. Biden's voting pattern, as it is displayed in three different issues does not seem friendly to the Turkish position. However, the shifts and changes in Biden's same voting pattern prove that rather than being a huge moralist or a humanist, Biden gives priority to national interests over his personal preferences. Biden as a statesman would not create extra problems for Turkey at the expense of U.S national interests.
5. When Biden started voting against the Turkish positions, Turkey's human rights record was not in good shape. When Turkey's human rights record began to improve, it is possible to detect a slight change in his voting behavior in favor of Turkey. For instance in the 2007 Hrant Dink/article 301 resolution, Biden mentioned Turkey's reaction to the assassination as a positive step and showed appreciation for Prime Minister R. Tayyip Erdoğan's words of condemning the assassination. Therefore, Turkey should keep its human rights record clean to avoid any further surprises.
6. Turkey has changed its official position on the issues of the events of 1915. Turkey's proactive steps should carry these issues to a point where ethnic lobbies in Washington should be rendered almost ineffective. There are things to be done in Washington and in the U.S. on a social level, such as cultivating a politically united diasporic Turkish community that could encounter the negative effect of ethnic lobbies, but these efforts take very long time. Alongside with the lobbying efforts in Washington, which would be totally ineffective in a possible Obama presidency, in the short run, the solution should be sought in the new Caucasus Platform that

⁸ Ali H. Aslan "Obama'nın Tercih ve Türkiye'ye Yansımalar," *Zaman*, August 25, 2008.



Turkey has initiated. The crises in Caucasus may create a unique opportunity for Turkey. As Georgia is under occupation, U.S will urge to gain Armenia for the West; the only way to achieve this goal is to engage Armenia through Turkey. This opportunity would give leverage to Turkey on Armenia. If used effectively, the genocide resolutions issue could be solved forever by making an agreement with Armenia, with the help of U.S., in the interest of stable relations between Turkey and Armenia. Such a move would save Turkey from any further worry on this subject, and would allow Turkey to focus on other vital issues in Washington.

7. Biden's oldest and most favorite subject, the Cyprus issue, is already frozen and far from creating urgent problems for Turkey after the Turkish Cypriot's 'yes' vote to the Annan plan. The negotiations on September 3rd in the UN between the Greek and Turkish sides of Cyprus, may help the situation go in a better direction.
8. Rather than narrowly hiding behind pretexts and slogans such as "anti-Turkish Biden,"⁹ the new dynamics of the change in Washington should be carefully examined. Even though it seems that a potential Obama presidency would be against Turkey's interests, Obama's overall position in favor multi-lateralism, the primacy of international organizations, energy policies and diplomacy over unilateralism and the use of force would create wider opportunities and render ethnic lobbies useless, or at least less effective.
9. In Iraq, soft partition or the Biden Plan have faded away and is not an option for the U.S., at least for now. Therefore, instead of highlighting an already dead-plan, it would be wiser to work on better plans for further social, cultural and political engagements with Northern Iraq, and to foster stable and equal relations with other political players in Iraqi politics. The process shows that Turkey's plan to solve Iraq's problem by means of engagements with its neighbors is more viable and workable. Therefore there is no need to revisit the "Biden Plan."
10. Turkey should correctly reassess its leverage on Iraq and U.S. in reference to Biden Plan. As it is mentioned in Iraqi Study Group Plan, one of the worries of U.S. about the viability of the Biden Plan was the risk of "destabilization of neighboring states, or attempts by neighboring states to dominate Iraqi regions" i.e. possible intervention of neighboring states namely, Turkey and Iran, which was openly mentioned by Biden, during the Democratic presidential debate in August 2007. Therefore, it is clear that Biden Plan did not die a natural death, but it was forced to death by various efforts including threats coming from the neighboring countries. Without over- or under-estimating its leverage, Turkey should support the efforts that foster the central government in Iraq without losing time on

⁹ Semih İdiz, "Türk Düşmanı Biden'ın Pelosi Açmazı," *Milliyet*, August 25, 2008.



trivial issues to enhance its hand for a unlikely potential revival of Biden Plan.

11. In Iraq, Biden opposes to permanent U.S. bases, which fits into Turkish position. As it is seen in the discussions on SOFA agreement that aims to regulate U.S. presence in Iraq, even once-seemed-weak Iraqi central government has an incredible effect on U.S. internal politics. Turkey should analyze the sources of Iraqi government's leverage to take advantage of Biden's position on permanent bases. Offer. To be able to do that, more cooperation and engagement with Democrats are needed more than ever to further and deepen the relations.
12. Biden's position on Iran is also very close to Turkey's position. Being against Iran's nuclear ambitions to acquire nuclear arms on the one hand, Biden is for more engagement with Iran. In at least for decade, starting from an effort to launch a dialogue with Iran's ex-president Mohammad Khatami, Biden has been advocating more engagement, more dialogue even to a degree that he has been portrayed as the sole responsible for Bush's failed Iran policy¹⁰. Since the Iran and Iraq issues are closely related to each other, a position seeking for engagement with Iran would not risk instability in Iraq by supporting a partition plan. In addition to that, engagement policy would help Turkey to have better relations with U.S. in seeking for alternative natural gas sources for both herself and for filling the Nabucco project.
13. The Georgia crisis proved that a democratic president would seek to build bridges, craft new alliances and work for more stability in the broader region as opposed to a potential Republican president who would take the risk of military encounter with Russia. If not a war, a republican president would force turkey to take side whereas a democratic president is more likely to leave a space for turkey for more diplomacy with the neighboring countries. A possible clash in the region, whether it is against Iran or Russia, will force Turkey to take sides against its will. Such a policy will be detrimental to Turkish foreign policy efforts launched and build in the last 6 years and will force Turkey to be a frontier state again as it was during the Cold War era, rather than a regional power. Therefore a democratic foreign policy vision, supported by both Biden and Obama, would favor a more diplomatically active Turkey that would benefit for both the U.S. and Turkey.
14. In all of these issues, the person that should be watched carefully is Obama, not Biden. Biden, as a pragmatic vice president, would not capable of creating more problems for a Turkey that has been working effectively with its neighbors and has a better human rights record than ever before. Spending more energy to analyze Obama's geopolitical priorities can benefit Turkey in the long run.

¹⁰ Michael Rubin, "Biden's Blink on Iran," *Washington Post*, August 28, 2008.

