

Rethinking Humanitarianism

Episode 3

US election special

Heba Aly: After a few tumultuous days of suspense, Joe Biden was declared the winner of the US presidential elections over the weekend. With just over 50% of the popular vote as of recording, the election was much closer than many expected. In his victory speech, Biden said he seeks to unify not divide the country.

Joe Biden: “I sought this office to restore the soul of America to rebuild the backbone of this nation - the middle class - and to make America respected around the world again.”

Aly: So what of that last promise? How will the Biden administration show up in the world? And is this an opportunity to reimagine US foreign policy and its humanitarian implications?

Welcome to a special US election edition of Rethinking Humanitarianism, a podcast series on the future of aid co-hosted by The New Humanitarian, and the Centre for Global Development in Geneva. I'm Heba Aly, director of The New Humanitarian. And I'll be flying solo today without my co host Jeremy Konyndyk, because and you heard it here first, Jeremy is going to be taking on a role in the new Biden transition. And he's in the midst at the moment of working things out, as you might imagine, so we hope to have him back soon for future episodes.

In this special episode, we are going to unravel the results of the US election, really through the lens of how the Biden administration can re-engage in the world's humanitarian and multilateral systems. What can we expect to see? And how might that foreign policy be different not only from Trump's, but from Barack Obama's?

Joining us from Washington, DC to explore some of these questions is Sarah Margon, Director of US foreign policy at the Open Society Foundations. Sarah was previously the Washington director for Human Rights Watch, and years before that senior foreign policy adviser to Democratic Senator Russ Feingold. Welcome, Sarah.

Sarah Margon: Hi, thanks for having me. Glad to be here.

Aly: My great pleasure to have you. Maybe just to start: how have the last few days been for you?

Margon: Oh, my God. I mean, it's been... in a sense, the election is kind of played out, as many of us were suspecting. And so on the one hand, it was not surprising. On the other hand, it's been such a whirlwind, it went from sort of very tense and upsetting and discouraging to incredibly exciting. And then I have two young boys, so on Saturday, when the election results officially came in, we headed down to Black Lives Matter Plaza in front of the White House with, you know, hundreds of other people in Washington and the whole city had erupted in joy. It's a 93% Democratic city and cars were honking banging pots, people singing, cheering. We got down to BLM Plaza, and it was just a true celebration. And the thing that was so striking is everybody was masked, everybody was masked in the right way too. And so you felt not just this sense of jubilation, and that, in a sense, the whole city could exhale. And obviously it goes beyond Washington, but that we could do it in a way that could keep us as safe as

possible. And that we were turning the page on an incoherent, insecure, and unsafe presidency, fuelled by people power and some amazing changes at the local level across this country that really turned red states to blue states. So it's a pretty powerful moment to be American.

Aly: Which is funny, because I remember watching a talk you gave at the beginning of the year saying, you've in recent years been pretty embarrassed to be an American?

Margon: Yeah, you know, I, it's not something I'm proud of, to sort of be embarrassed of where I come from, but I was so shocked. I mean, I'm a baseline optimist. So for the last four years, I have continued to feel like it can't get any worse than this. And I felt pretty mortified to come from a country that, you know, had elected this individual, and I think it's worth saying that in last week's election, you know, it wasn't a landslide in the way I think some had hoped, where it would be a real repudiation of this kind of leadership, this polarising white supremacist, racist, aggressive America first leadership. I mean, 70 million Americans did vote for Trump, again. There was not a great rebuke towards his words, his actions, and his policies. And so while President Trump will go, we hope – he may end up having to be dragged out of the White House – there's still a very significant portion of this country that feels he should represent us as Americans. And so that means that while you know, many of us are rejoicing at the shift and the change, there's a lot of work we need to do here in the US, not just because of the damage that Trump did. We've got our own domestic crisis of really epic proportions right now. But to heal, and to bridge the, the gaps, the lacuna that have been there for a long time, but which President Trump really exacerbated and expanded, and that's, that's gonna take a pretty, pretty significant amount of time and a lot of hard work.

Aly: So just to kind of unpack that a bit more, Foreign Policy had an article back in September with the headline, “the most important election ever” right, arguing that the fate of the world depended on the results of this election. Is that overstated to you? Or I guess, to your mind, what were the stakes?

Margon: Yeah, they were pretty high. I mean, one of the things I've really noticed in the last couple of years – you know, I've worked on foreign policy, national security for a couple of decades at this point – and I think one of the things that I've really noticed is how many people and how many governments were, from outside, people, you know, from around the world, and then on foreign governments, were watching what was going on in the United States, and watching not just the policies, but the responses at the more local level, the governors, the states, the protests, and they were extrapolating from it. And I think it matters, you know, the US is, there's always been a lot of hypocrisy in US policy. The United States presidents of both parties have said things, and then acted in different ways. But the chaos and the crisis that we've seen domestically in the US has sort of really ripped the Band-Aid off in terms of some of the actions and the words that the US has said, globally. And so I think we're standing at this moment where president-elect Biden and Vice president-elect Harris have this opportunity to change and do a much better job, not just of healing domestically, which is obviously going to be a huge priority, and should really be the top priority for their administration in January. But also to sort of shift the way the US engages in the world so that in some cases, there's not just leadership but partnership, and that the US is listening more and matching words, which – you know, the rhetoric is often very good – with actions and not undermining the ostensible goals, meeting much more, the way the US engages diplomatically with how it responds in-country. There's so many steps that the Biden administration will be able to take to repair relationships, but I think a key part of that is going to be bringing Americans along as well. And showing Americans why it matters, why the US has an important role to play. And how it can positively impact them and why that's so important. On the flip side, I mean, you could say, you know, people power democratic movement won last week, and that says something to so many

leaders around the world that have been given a free pass by President Trump, that have been encouraged or that have modelled themselves after President Trump or frankly, vice-versa. So, you know, those are the leaders of Hungary, in the Philippines, Brazil, Russia, those alliances with, you know, wannabe authoritarians, authoritarians or, you know, populists really took a hit this week in terms of the status quo and the strength of their engagement. So in that sense, it really is a pretty critical election, not just for us here in the US, but for the rest of the world.

Aly: So if we kind of start tackling that piece by piece, I mean, there are a number of areas in which Trump's foreign policy was a dramatic deviation from the previous administration. If we look at, you know, the US formally withdrawing from the Paris climate accords last week, the Trump administration slashing budgets for the World Health Organization, for the UN agency that helps Palestine refugees, UNRWA, taking a tough line on migration, reducing resettlement for refugees in the US, the COVID response, you know, wars abroad – I think Obama's record was conflicted in that regard, but Trump has certainly in his kind of uncompromising support for Saudi Arabia taking it a step further. So where do you see a Biden administration showing up differently in these areas?

Margon: I mean, everywhere, to start? Just look, I mean, I think on day one, I think on day one we're gonna see a pretty quick reversal of some of the more egregious executive orders. And in a sense, I mean, every president does this, right, they come in, and they sort of take a look at what the previous president did, the previous administration, and say, What can we change quickly to signal our intent and signal where we stand, and in this case, there was so much executive overreach, that there's actually a lot Biden is going to be able to do on day one. So that means rejoining the Paris Agreement, rejoining the World Health Organization, rejoining the migration compact, it means reversing the Muslim ban, reversing the targeted sanctions against the International Criminal Court prosecutor. I mean, there's just such a significant list of actions that he can take on day one to reverse the US's engagement and show that the US intends to engage constructively. It's gonna have a tremendous ripple effect all over the world, and I think it's going to be received very positively. What happens on day two, day three, and the days thereafter is where, you know, things are really gonna matter. Obviously, rejoining the JCPOA, or the Iran agreement, is a huge priority for this administration. That's not going to happen on day one, that's going to require a significant amount of work here in the US, and then, of course, with European allies. And then, you know, Iran is not a static actor – things have changed pretty significantly there. So how the Biden administration is able to go about that process here and with allies is going to send a tremendously important signal about, you know, the commitment to diplomacy and the commitment to a US global engagement, rebuilding relationship with the Europeans, that transatlantic alliance, which has been so central to so much the US has done and is such a critical part of rebuilding a new world order, right? Where alliances actually mean something, and that they're not just founded on defence agreements, or sort of trade agreements, but that they're part of something much more comprehensive, I think there's a real opportunity to do that, and, frankly, a tremendous need. I mean, you know, dealing with China, dealing with climate change is going to require all of those agreements. So those things are going to take more time. But I think there's been a real commitment to shifting how the US engages from the very day the president-elect gets into the White House.

Aly: And you talk about the fact that a lot of Trump's actions were from executive orders that can be undone will help, but with a Senate that is likely not to be on the same page as the president. How much of an obstacle is that likely to be? I mean, voters clearly haven't given Democrats the right to govern fully as they see fit, they have still put in place a whole bunch of Republican stops elsewhere in the overall government.

Margon: Well, the truth is, we have to actually wait until January because of Georgia. So in fact, there may be a Democratic majority in the Senate, and then look, things will be a lot smoother, at least until the Midterm elections. So for the first two years, for the president-elect to move things through Congress, and that's everything from his cabinet nominations, right, which some of them may hit a wall early on if it's a Republican-led Senate. But if it's a Democratic-led Senate, there's tremendous opportunity to move a whole number of legislative items that have been on the docket, many of which are domestic, and I think that's that's really you know, there's issues related to the Voting Rights Act and to the US economy that are really important to move, not just because the signal that they send overseas, although obviously combating domestic inequality and addressing structural racism has become a real priority for this administration, and is going to require legislative change. But also because I think it starts to show the world that the US is a functioning democracy again, and that despite President Trump's best intentions, it has not been eroded down to the studs, that there is actually something left with the institutions. And for Americans to obviously feel the impact of that would be tremendous, but to also see the checks and balances of the US government working again.

Aly: But on that global agenda, you've just actually touched on the next obstacle to a dramatically different US foreign policy moving forward. Well, I should correct myself, it is likely to be dramatically different no matter what, but a much more engaged US in the world. What can we realistically expect, given how much work the US has to do at home, and the extent to which Biden is going to have to prove that he is also a president of the American people?

Margon: Yeah, I mean, he's been very clear in the last couple of days in saying he's the president for all Americans. I do think the US is going to be very domestically focused understanding that we've got to get COVID under control here in the US. I mean, it's just ravaging communities, especially Black and brown communities. We've got to sort of jumpstart the economy and get people back, you know, back to a place where they have income. So that is going to be a tremendous focus. But it's important to note that there's a lot of ways that the US can engage overseas. One of the things I really hope this administration will do will eradicate the lines between domestic and foreign, so while the US is working on, you know, domestic, you know, racial justice and issues around structural racism, I also hope that we'll start to see leadership on global inequality, and global racism – there's so many opportunities for the US to play a constructive role not just by modelling, you know, better engagement at home, but you know if you think about the way police engage globally. There's no great story out there of sort of, you know, security forces, as we call them, overseas, law enforcement, as it's called here in the US; there's no great example across the board of a police force that hasn't been sort of brutal and abusive. Maybe in the Scandinavian countries, but I think this is, over my career, this is a constant theme, especially in countries of crisis or conflict. And so there is, you know, the opportunity to say, 'part of democracy is that we are able to revise and engage and, and change ourselves and that we are constantly in a state of change. And look, we can do this. And, you know, we don't have all the answers, but if we can start to make real change, you can do it too'. So I think that has the potential to be tremendously beneficial, globally. I mean, I also think, you know, one of the things I forgot to mention on day one is the repeal of the Global Gag Rule, which is really going to show America's interest in supporting women and families overseas, and at the same time joining Covax to respond to COVID at a collective and collaborative level will show some restored leadership and partnership in dealing with global health. Those are all really, really important steps, and I think, you know, the key for me, may sound silly when you're talking about a government, but is doing all of this reengagement with a sense of humility.

Aly: So I was just gonna ask about that. Because even the way you framed it, when you say that the US would be able to say, look, we've been able to make changes, you can too. That has not at all been the

narrative with which the US goes out in the world, right? It's, 'Look at us. We're so perfect. We've got it all sorted out'. And I guess my question would be, after these last four years in which it has become very clear to the rest of the world that the US doesn't have it all figured out. Can you come back from that? I would offer that I think the US has lost a fair bit of credibility, and certainly in the days of, well, both COVID and the protests we saw after George Floyd's murder, a lot of countries saying, 'Why should we be listening to them? Don't come preaching to me about human rights and democracy'. So how does the US get over that? And should it even be trying to get over that?

Margon: Yeah, I mean, I couldn't agree more, the world hasn't stood still, while the US has been both messing it up and making a mess of it here at home. There is a huge credibility problem. And I think it's important to know that there was a credibility problem before Trump came into office. Right, particularly in the Middle East, but certainly not exclusively. And I think, you know, the way the US military has dominated US foreign policy, and the real, sort of the aggressive way in which that has dominated how the US is seen overseas, has, you know, really requires a doubling down of not just diplomacy, but sort of human engagement. And I think part of what's so important about the US saying, 'yes, you know, we were never perfect, and to say anything otherwise would be actually to undermine our own efforts'; but to acknowledge the fact that maybe the principles on which the US was founded were idealised, but they really haven't been embraced in the way that they can be to sort of realise the full potential of freedom and rights. And of course, with that comes responsibility. So it's not just white men who benefit from this founding principle. But it's everybody in this country, across the board. And there, there's a tonne of work to do. I mean, there's just extraordinary amounts of work to do, and to acknowledge that the government plays a huge part of doing that, working in coordination with both civil society and the social justice movements I think would be a tremendous and sort of bold step forward for this administration, if they were willing to do that, well, excuse me, for the incoming administration, if they were willing to do that. And that would be a pretty unprecedented model of engagement to sort of fix, or at least start to fix so much of what has been broken, and then really shattered over the last four years. And, you know, the US modelling that kind of behaviour is not going to change how it's received overseas, but it may make the US a better partner. And in that sense, I think the US can begin to regain credibility. I was so sort of floored to see over the last couple of days the global response to Biden's election, which I expected to be significant, but to hear, you know, the church bells in Paris and to see, you know, the notes, welcome back America. I don't take that as a welcome back, you can reassume a global leadership role, I take that as a 'hey, we need you as part of the community', the world, you know, as much as I sort of would have liked to see otherwise, the world hasn't entirely organised itself in the US's absence over the last four years. There have been moments when governments have come together to push important priorities and initiatives. But for the most part, we've seen, you know, a little bit of chaos and discord. And I do think the US can come back and play an important role in helping to bring the international community back together, but not alone. And not in the same way.

Aly: I want to unpack that a bit because, you know, you have alluded already in this conversation and elsewhere, that it's not as though US foreign policy was perfect under Obama or previous administrations. And, you know, I think I heard you say that you hadn't felt the US was a force for good in the world since at least 9/11. I was reading a piece in Foreign Affairs over the weekend, which essentially argued that the liberal international order of the post-Cold War era is no more, right? And that a new administration shouldn't set out to return to what existed before, but should try to build a structure that's better suited for the 21st century. And you've kind of mentioned this new model, new world order. And I'd love to just unpack what that looks like – what does it look like when the US is playing a constructive role in the world without necessarily being the dominant world leader?

Margon: You know, I think, in part we don't know yet. We don't know how the US, or if the US, will be able to do that. And I do think part of the challenge for a president like Biden is choosing individuals, you know, at senior levels who weren't just Obama officials, and sort of come with that mindset. And so bringing in some new fresh senior leadership and engaging in a way where the language of the senior officials is met by concrete policies and actions that encourage a sustained collaborative approach. Let me give you an example. I, you know, over the last four years, I have watched President Trump not only go after civil society and the media, you know, sort of publicly, but really choose sides in terms of which organisations to meet with and to support and to embrace and to promote, and then to denigrate the others. And that is a small thing that the new administration will be able to do, but regular meetings with a whole range of civil society actors, not just American ones, but sort of every time a senior official travels, sitting down, having a conversation, understanding where things come from, from their perspective. Because one of the things that's happened over the last four years is that these alternative centres of power have really developed. And we've seen this in a lot of countries where there's, you know, pretty repressive, authoritarian leaders, but you've seen these alternative centres of power develop, that are trying to push back against governments, hardline governments, while also support communities and support populations, and sort of reaching out to these different communities, that sort of thing. I realised that diplomacy is no longer just about government to government relations. Diplomacy is about engaging communities and different groups that would send such a new and different message and I think would, would really sort of be revolutionary and, I think, be very well received.

Aly: And does Biden as the vice president when a US foreign policy had a very different idea of what its role was in the world – is he capable of that more humble, detached, collaborative approach? Do you think?

Margon: I do. I do think so. I mean, president-elect Biden has been working on foreign policy and national security for longer than I've been alive, if I'm not mistaken...

Aly: But that's, that's kind of part of the problem, right? He's part of this old system.

Margon: Yes. I think he understands, sort of, in many ways, how the world has worked. And I do think that gives him a tremendous opportunity to reflect, I'm sure, in fact, he's done this already. And it's clear it's not working in quite the same way. So if you know where you've been, and you know how it was done, you can start to see with the support of, you know, advisors and, and experts, you can start to say, 'look, here's where we need to make some changes'. And I do think that there's an openness, and I do think that there's a recognition that going in sort of guns-a-blazing, no pun intended, you know, to return to diplomacy, would serve nothing and nobody. And that it's got to be done different. If you think back just to US politics for a second, when Biden received the nomination, one of the first things he did was build this unity task force with Senator Sanders on all kinds of domestic issues: healthcare, the economy, climate. And this enabled the progressive side of the Democratic house to come together with the more moderate and sort of conventional policy thinkers. And for a lot of those domestic issues, it created a path forward that was pretty successful in meeting the needs of both sides – not across the board and everybody wasn't satisfied – but it tried to find a bit of a middle road to recognise that the democratic Democratic Party is a really big tent right now – and there's a lot of different kinds of Democrats there. That didn't happen in foreign policy and national security. And so in a sense, there's still a question out there of how he's going to drive his policy forward, because there hasn't been a full plan articulated. I think the progressive community in the US is going to feel like there's still a lot of work to do because they haven't had that time to sort of sit down with his advisers and experts and say,

'here's how we envision the world; here's our path forward, here's our blueprint, let's see how it meets with yours'. It's still a little bit of uncharted territory, but if you look at the Democratic Party convention, if you look at the speeches that Biden has, given, it's clear, he understands, at a significantly greater level than the current president, sort of the ways of the world. And he's, I think, going to be able to shift towards a different kind of engagement, because what, you know, was done when he was vice-president, isn't sort of enough right now. And obviously, what President Trump employed as a foreign policy approach was disastrous, so they need some fresh thinking, sort of a reimagined way of engaging, and then I think the question becomes: How does that sit with the community of progressives versus the more conventional and moderate?

Aly: And to what extent is that not only because he recognises the way the world has changed, but also he's smart enough to understand perhaps in a way that Hillary Clinton didn't, the realities at home, and that, you know, Americans don't want to be the ones, you know, carrying or being the global caretakers of this liberal international system anymore. To what extent is, is America's embrace of internationalism, more of an aberration than it is the norm in US history, and he gets that?

Margon: I don't know. I mean, I think he's a pretty strong internationalist, in the sense, he understands that, you know, that the US, you know, has a very important role to play and was one of the founders of the current global order in the post World War II era. And so it does make sense if you think about it, you know, if the US helped to found it and create it. It was wobbly at the end of the Obama administration, for sure. There were a lot of norms and laws and standards, and customs that were really sort of being abrogated, or run over, or sort of run away from by different leaders without any consequences for doing so. But it does make sense that understanding that world order so intently that watching, you know, President Trump both bash the current one and sort of try to shift to a new one, that he, that a president like Biden would come in, and say, all right, well, let's get down to brass tacks. We had something significant here. It has not been fully shattered. But it's broken, and we need to play a role in rebuilding it. But it can't look exactly like how it looked before because the world has changed in the intervening period. And because we need to make sure that the way we engage globally is fit to purpose for the current modern world. And that is a very different world, right? And I think that is going to require some pretty bold and imaginative thinking on the side of the US. I do think it's gonna require a change in sort of the role of the Defence Department. First diplomacy, you know, this is something that has been talked about, for, gosh, at least a decade, right sort of diplomacy, development, and defence. And I do think the Obama administration did quite a bit to sort of push the diplomats out, but not enough to rein in the defence department. And they did a fair bit to elevate development but what needs to happen now is so much bigger and so much bolder. We're really talking about changing the frameworks by which the US engages globally. And the State Department has been so, really, attacked and belittled that the scale and scope of work that is required is actually a real opportunity, if you think about it from a positive side, which is that all right, we got to really rebuild from the ground up. There's some amazing people who stayed the course over four years. So we do have a foundation. But together, we're going to rebuild sort of how the US engages, strengthen the Foreign Service. And we're going to get it ready for the 21st century, because it's not there right now. And that's a pretty incredible opportunity, It takes a lot of work. But I think there's a lot of people both going into the administration and in Congress and outside of Congress that are ready to help do that.

Aly: But what then happens to Trumpism? I mean, what will remain of Trumpism, which surely, as you said off the top is not just Trump. And how easily can you just turn the page on that when there are still a whole bunch of people within, well half the country, that clearly wants that 'America first' approach, and frankly, a lot of people even on the left and the progressive side of the country that wants a much

less interventionist American state, given some of the debacles that we've seen in recent years. Those are maybe two different, two different constituencies, but especially the kind of Trump legacy that feels like something you can't just turn the page on that easily.

Margon: No, no, and I don't think we're gonna see it turn off either. I mean, if and when Trump finally leaves the White House, he's going to still carry a megaphone with him. That's gonna require a lot of work, that's going to require a lot of sort of local engagement and healing. But I do also think that if a president-elect Biden is able to get COVID under control and to start to rebuild the economy in a way that actually helps bolster the middle-class and create more for them, that that's an opportunity for engagement.

And then to your second question: intervention, I wouldn't say that the US engaging globally is intervention. Right? I would like to reserve intervention for when the US launches military engagement. And I think that's one of the things where we're really seeing a change. There's a reason both President Trump and president-elect Biden embraced the idea of ending the forever wars. They both have very different tactical approaches to how to implement a strategy like that. But it's because the American people don't want the US engaged militarily overseas anymore, not in the way that they have. That's very clear. And so I do think that, you know, for president-elect Biden, there's a tremendous opportunity to meet the needs of American voters of all different communities by bringing US troops home in a responsible manner from Afghanistan, by showing you know, that if we decrease the Pentagon budget, we can actually shift some of this to a greener economy. And so the jobs aren't going to be lost, per se, they're going to be shifted. So I think there's tremendous opportunity to respond to a pretty loud call from Americans across the spectrum on that issue. And then really strengthening and rebuilding diplomacy and development is an opportunity to talk about engagement and partnership as opposed to intervention.

Aly: Yeah, I think I tend to use that word because in many ways they end up being one in the same.

Margon: And that's the challenge for president-elect Biden. That's exactly the challenge, right? And my hope is that, four years is a short period of time, but my hope is that over four years he will be able to clarify and help people and communities and government leaders around the world understand that there is a difference.

Aly: So what do you think this whole shift – if we are to think it possible for US foreign policy to be reimagined and for the US to show up as a constructive player in the world, but without the dominance it used to have and with that humility that you've described in those partnerships and listening to civil society and all the rest of it. How does that change, then, the landscape for our primary audience: humanitarians, so people working to respond to crises around the world and who have kind of gotten used to a certain world order within which they work? How do you think this kind of shift would then have spillover effects for them?

Margon: Yeah, it's interesting. You know, I think a lot of other governments that we've seen in small settings kind of step up and lead issues around humanitarian crises, or conflicts. I'm thinking of the role of the Dutch in Geneva around the Human Rights Council, and the role of the Saudi-led coalition there. And so I think if the US shows up, ready to listen, and to partner, and not necessarily to dictate how things should happen, it creates an opportunity for other governments to lead on a bigger stage. That may, to be honest, take some cajoling and convincing from the United States behind the scenes, where senior government officials say, 'we'll support it, but we think it's better for us not to lead'. But that

sends a pretty valuable message. And I think, in a sense, could steady some of the entities that you've been talking about. You know, I think about what happened to the humanitarian community when the US pulled out of the Palestinian Refugee Agency, UNRWA, and when they pulled out of providing funds for organisations because of the Global Gag Rule – so many governments tried to step in and provide assistance in the US's place. And that's a temporary solution to the larger problems. So with the US coming back in and saying, 'you know what, we're here, we're going to be consistent about it, but we're not necessarily going to be sort of the brand leader of all of this'. I think in a sense, it creates, or it reinforces, a foundation, but doesn't necessarily make the pointy edge as brittle, if you will.

Aly: So what will you, I don't know if it's day one, or day three or four, but what will you be watching for as signs that this kind of vision that you've outlined for a new model, a new way of working in the world, that Biden is heading in that direction? What are the kind of indicators that, 'Yeah, okay, there's a change here, not from Trump, but from Obama and previous Democratic – or mainstream – US foreign policy thinking?

Margon: Yeah, so obviously, part of it, and I think the world is gonna watch and I think, I don't think this is gonna be a tough one, but I think I'll be watching for the day one, Executive Order reversals. And then I'll be watching sort of what comes next in terms of bolstering the commitment to re-engage the WHO; joining COVAX to help develop a vaccine that is equitable, and accessible by all. What, you know, what does that look like? How is that? How are these entities staffed? That's going to be another key piece is to see: who is put in place? And I, you know, I know that the binder ministrations will really aim for diversity, not just in terms of race and ethnicity, but also in terms of perspective, as to who's coming in at various levels and what the experience they're bringing is. You know, there's been a lot of talk in Washington, at least over the last couple of years, about creating a national security and foreign policy apparatus that is more reflective of Americans and of America. And I think if that's true, we will see a different approach to engaging because it will be a more thoughtful, reflective way of engaging. So that's something to look for. So who goes where, not just at senior level positions, because obviously, you know, there's a lot of work that gets done under that. So that's one thing to think about.

But then I think sort of how president-elect Biden and vice president-elect Harris engage the rest of the world. You know, there's obviously going to be some immediate travel for the president-elect, but then they're talking about hosting this democratic summit within the first year. And I think for me, that presents a tremendous opportunity. But of course, who gets invited to this summit? Like which, which democracies are going to be there? And what's the criteria? And how does a president Biden's administration respond to the backsliding in Brazil and Hungary and Poland, in the Philippines? And what do they do about it? Right, those are the types of things that I'm going to be looking at. How do they respond to Egypt's President Sisi who has become so unbelievably repressive across the spectrum to justify his own power?

And then the last piece that I'll say is the other thing I'm going to be looking at is sort of the change of frame, not just in terms of a reimagined foreign policy, but we are post-9/11, in the sense that we're coming up on the 20th anniversary, but the way in which the US has responded to 9/11 has sort of hung over the United States like a dark cloud for 20 years. So what steps will a Biden administration take to undo some of that? Whether it's revising the drone policy so it goes beyond what the Obama administration did? Or, once and for all, finally closing Guantanamo? You know, will they take steps to hold anybody accountable in the Trump administration? Or will they just let them go? Those are types of things, the tougher things, but the things that I'll be watching closely.

Aly: Really interesting. I don't want to keep it too long, because I'm sure it's chaos in Washington, and you have some tweets to be reading and paying attention to. But we do ask every, every guest on our show one final question, which is usually: If money and power were no constraint, what would be your kind of million-dollar idea – if you could wave your magic wand – to improve the way the world responds to humanitarian crises? And I think in your case, let me adapt that a bit and say: If you could do one thing that would dramatically improve US foreign policy – and thus how that affects humanitarian issues – what would it be?

Margon: It really is the million-dollar question, isn't it? I think, given where we are right now, and watching the resurgence of COVID, not just here, but everywhere, it would have to be a COVID vaccine that really can get to every single person on the planet, that is cost-free, and that everybody can have access to. This is the issue that – instead of doubling down and isolating ourselves – the world needs to really work together to deal with, because, you know, the next pandemic is around the corner. And we don't have the infrastructure anymore to collaborate, partly because the Trump administration took it apart, but partly because the institutions globally that require responding to COVID have been wobbling themselves. And because of the scale and scope and nature of COVID, so many other global health and aid programmes have been impacted negatively. So much work the US has done on PEPFAR, other global health issues, malaria, TB, have been undone, or at least set back significantly. So I think, at this moment in time, there's no other answer in my mind, but to get that vaccine and to get it so that it is free and accessible to everybody.

The Biden transition team has put out its taskforce today and put out their Covid plan and it does talk about a vaccine that is available for all for all Americans. And I think, you know, if we're gonna do away with this, what's the phrase that's come up recently, vaccine nationalism, that a tremendous opportunity for a new US administration would be also to say, 'we're going to make sure that this vaccine is available for everybody in the world. And we're going to do that with our partners. And we're going to put an end to this vaccine nationalism, immediately'. This is a transnational issue that bleeds across borders. And if we have seen nothing else from this pandemic, we have seen people responding the same way all over the world, and it connects us and unites us, it doesn't divide us. And I think that's a powerful, powerful tool for the US to use successfully, and an important one.

Aly: And that probably is one of the areas where, had we had a second term of the Trump administration, that picture would have been really, I think it's safe to say ugly in terms of competitiveness and more of the nationalism that we saw when the virus first broke out. And certainly at The New Humanitarian, we were paying a lot of attention to when this vaccine comes out, who was going to get access to it and what kind of fights were going to unfold. And at least under this administration, there's I think, some hope that that might be a slightly fairer process.

Sarah, thank you so much for your thoughts and for taking the time.

Margon: I am really happy to join, and thanks for inviting me.

Aly: And good luck in the days ahead.

Margon: Yeah, thanks so much. It's gonna be tough.

Aly: We love hearing listener reactions, and keen to hear your thoughts on what we've talked about today. What do you think the implications of a Biden administration are for US foreign policy and for humanitarianism more broadly? And how can US foreign policy be reimagined in light of changes in recent years?

Tweet your comments to us: @CGDev and @newhumanitarian with the hashtag #RethinkingHumanitarianism, or send us a voice recording to RHpodcast@thenewhumanitarian.org – and we'll play your thoughts on the next episode.

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