

RE-ENGAGE THE UNITED STATES IN GLOBAL HEALTH SECURITY

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR
ADAM KAMRADT-SCOTT



Context and background

The recent change in presidential leadership provides a key opportunity for Australia to engage the United States in strengthening global and regional health security. Within weeks of President Biden taking office, several Trump administration policies relating to global health were retracted or overturned. This notable change in direction has been described as the United States returning to its former global leadership role, but the reputational damage will take longer to repair. World leaders and global health experts have pointed to the vacillation between Republican and Democratic administrations on multiple policy issues like the global gag rule,^{4.1} and more recently the former president's attack on the World Health Organization,^{4.2} which have contributed to a perception the United States is unreliable. This presents an opportunity for Australia to work closely with the United States to repair the country's standing in the global health community while simultaneously strengthening regional and global health security.

The Biden administration

On assuming office, President Biden moved to revoke several decisions of the former administration pertaining to global health. As pledged during the election campaign, on his first day in office, President Biden

retracted the Trump administration's effort to withdraw the United States from the World Health Organization.^{4.3} The day after the inauguration, the administration released its *National Strategy for COVID-19 Response and Pandemic Preparedness* in which restoring US leadership and advancing health security to be better prepared for future health threats was identified as one of seven priority goals.^{4.4} Coinciding with the strategy document's release, Dr Anthony Fauci confirmed to the World Health Organization's Executive Board that the United States would join the COVAX initiative that seeks to provide two billion doses of COVID-19 vaccines to low and middle-income countries, increase technical cooperation, and re-engage in multilateral efforts to defeat COVID-19 and ensure enhanced preparedness.^{4.5} To assist in coordinating these efforts, the Biden administration has re-instituted the National Security Council Directorate on Global Health Security and Biodefense and pledged to reinvigorate the Global Health Security Agenda,^{4.6} both of which were initiatives of the former Obama administration but which had languished under President Trump.^{4.7} Further measures, such as creating a National Center for Epidemic Forecasting and Outbreak Analytics, advocating for the creation of a new United Nations facilitator for biological threats, and working with multilateral partners including the G7, G20, ASEAN, and African Union to strengthen preparedness are also outlined in the National Strategy.^{4.8}

WORLD LEADERS AND GLOBAL HEALTH EXPERTS HAVE POINTED TO THE VACILLATION BETWEEN REPUBLICAN AND DEMOCRATIC ADMINISTRATIONS ON MULTIPLE POLICY ISSUES LIKE THE GLOBAL GAG RULE, AND MORE RECENTLY THE FORMER PRESIDENT'S ATTACK ON THE WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION, WHICH HAVE CONTRIBUTED TO A PERCEPTION THE UNITED STATES IS UNRELIABLE.

Australian interests

Australia's interests are best served by seeing the United States re-engage with the global health community, but it is unlikely the United States will return to the leadership role it once assumed. There are two key reasons for this. First, for at least the initial 12-24 months of the Biden administration, the government will be appropriately focused on containing the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus (commonly known as the coronavirus) throughout the United States. This is likely to focus resources and attention on the United States' domestic situation in the near term. Second, several other countries sought to fill the leadership vacuum created in global health govern-

Table 5. Status of the Biden administration’s proposed actions on global health and pandemic response (as of 4 February 2021)

Action	Requires Administrative or Congressional Action?	Status
Restore the National Security Council’s Directorate for Global Health Security and Biodefense	Administrative	✓
Rescind the Mexico City Policy	Administrative	✓
Restore funding to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)	Administrative	✓
Release a National COVID-19 Response Strategy, including a strategy for international engagement	Administrative	✓
Restore funding to WHO and reverse Trump administration decision to withdraw from WHO membership	Administrative	✓
Support the Access to COVID-19 Tools (ACT) Accelerator and join COVAX	Administrative/Congressional*	✓
Create position of Coordinator of the COVID-19 Response and Counselor, reporting to the President	Administrative	✓
Develop a diplomatic outreach plan led by the State Department to enhance the US response to COVID-19, including through the provision of support to the most vulnerable communities	Administrative**	✓
Provide US\$11 billion to support “international health and humanitarian response,” including efforts to distribute countermeasures for COVID-19, build capacity required to fight COVID-19 and emerging biological threats	Congressional	Proposed
Ensure adequate, sustained US funding for global health security	Congressional	Proposed
Expand US diplomacy on global health and pandemic response, including elevating US support for the Global Health Security Agenda (GHSA)	Administrative	Proposed
Call for the creation of permanent international catalytic financing mechanism for global health security and work with international financial institutions, including multilateral development banks, to promote support for combating COVID-19 and strengthening global health security	Administrative	Proposed
Call for creation of a permanent facilitator within the Office of the United Nations Secretary-General for response to high consequence biological events	Administrative	Proposed

Source: Jennifer Kates and Josh Michaud, “What Will Be the Contours of the Biden Administration’s Global Health Agenda?” 9 February 2021. Available at: <https://www.kff.org/global-health-policy/issue-brief/what-will-be-the-contours-of-the-biden-administrations-global-health-agenda/>

*Depending on the details of the administration’s proposal to support the ACT-Accelerator and join COVAX, Congressional approval may be required.

**The National Security Memorandum requires the Secretary of State, in consultation with the Secretary of Health and Human Services, the Representative of the United States to the United Nations, the Administrator of USAID, and the Director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, to develop this plan within 14 days or as soon as possible.

ance by the Trump administration's 'America First' policies, and now appear unwilling to cede that influence, viewing the United States as an "unreliable ally."^{4.9}

Australia can play an important diplomatic role in supporting the United States – including the endorsement of its reliability as a trusted partner – where shared interests exist. It can also actively seek out a number of new opportunities to enhance US-Australia cooperation. Global health security is one such area. The Australian Government's regional health security initiative that witnessed the creation of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT)'s Indo-Pacific Centre for Health Security,^{4.10} the recently announced A\$500 million regional vaccine initiative,^{4.11} and efforts between the US military and Australian Defence Force to strengthen civil-military health cooperation across the Indo-Pacific have provided a solid basis for further US-Australia cooperation.^{4.12} Strengthening and building on these existing initiatives, aligning development assistance to prioritise strengthening health systems and workforces, re-invigorating some of the health-related multilateral initiatives, and working constructively together to reform the World Health Organization offer a number of opportunities to not only counter moves by other countries to increase their influence throughout the region but also demonstrate a re-engaged and responsive United States.

Policy recommendations

- › **Initiate ministerial discussions for a joint regional health security initiative involving the United States, Australia, Japan and India.** Renewed interest in 'The Quad' multilateral arrangement provides a key opportunity to now strengthen regional health security, which reflects long-standing shared interests by all four governments. Intra-regional vaccine production and distribution could provide an immediate area for collaboration while intergovernmental talks commence to identify new synergies and areas for cooperation in strengthening regional disease surveillance and response capacities.^{4.13}
- › **Further strengthen civil-military cooperation in health security in the Indo-Pacific region.** As documented in the 2019 AUSMIN statement on global health security,^{4.14} the US military Indo-Pacific Command and the Australian Defence Force have made good initial progress in strengthening civilian and military cooperation for health security. These efforts are only at a nascent stage though and can be further expanded via providing technical assistance and training to other militaries in the region engaged in health assistance. These measures would create new opportunities for military-military cooperation while also serving to strengthen civil-military norms and enhance regional stability and security.
- › **Strengthen and re-invigorate the Global Health Security Agenda (GHSA).** The GHSA initiative was launched in 2014 under the Obama administration and offers a viable intergovernmental platform for supporting countries in the Indo-Pacific region to strengthen their capacities in disease detection, surveillance and response.^{4.15} The GHSA, which languished under the former Trump administration, could be relaunched and repurposed to collaborate with other multilateral institutions such as the Asian Development Bank and World Bank to provide targeted development assistance for regional health system strengthening and workforce capacity building. The GHSA could also be used constructively to develop consensus on key issues, such as reform of the World Health Organization and proposals to strengthen multilateral cooperation in global health security.