

Biden the Realist

The President's Foreign Policy Doctrine Has Been Hiding in Plain Sight

By Joshua Shiffrin and Stephen Wertheim

President Joe Biden was supposed to return U.S. foreign policy to its pre-Trump path. A septuagenarian with a half century of experience in national politics, he was the presidential candidate who most clearly embodied the American establishment. Surely, the expectation went, he would bring back the United States' pursuit of political and military preeminence designed to reshape the world in its own image. Biden even presented the restoration of U.S. leadership in global affairs as his hallmark: "America is back," he proclaimed after taking office.

But Biden's decision to terminate the U.S. war in Afghanistan has revealed another side of the United States' 46th president. In ending the two-decades-long war, Biden rejected every "liberal internationalist" premise of the enterprise, including the notion that building a democratic Afghanistan and transforming the region served U.S. interests or advanced universal values. He repeatedly argued that the United States had only one valid reason to use force there: to "get the terrorists who attacked us on 9/11" and might attack again. Once that objective had been achieved, the United States had no business waging war. It was for "the Afghan people alone to decide their future," he said, including whether they would live in a Western-style democracy or under Taliban rule.

The Taliban's swift takeover, far from changing Biden's mind, seems to have only affirmed his views about the limits of U.S. military power—in Afghanistan and elsewhere. Ending the war was "about ending an era of major military operations to remake other countries," he said after the last U.S. soldier left Afghanistan.

All this might surprise those who detect a "Biden doctrine" aiming to assert American power and defend democracy across the globe. Yet the Biden who terminated the United States' longest war has been hiding in plain sight. Throughout his career, Biden has put the pragmatic pursuit of national security over foreign policy orthodoxy. For more than a decade, that calculus has made him a critic of regime-change wars and other efforts to promote American values by military force.

Although his predecessor, Donald Trump, gave voice to similar impulses, it is **Biden who offers a more coherent version of pragmatic realism**—a mode of thought that prizes the advancement of tangible U.S. interests, expects other states to follow their own interests, and changes course to get what the United States needs in a competitive world. If Biden continues to apply this vision, he will deliver a welcome change from decades of overassertive U.S. foreign policy that has squandered lives and resources in pursuit of unachievable goals.

LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE

Since entering the Senate in 1973, Biden has stood out for adapting his foreign policy views to changing domestic and international circumstances. He struck a moderate line early in his national political career when confronted with Americans' weariness with the war in Vietnam in the 1970s and mounting tensions with the Soviet Union in the 1980s. He opposed sending

additional military aid to South Vietnam in 1975 as North Vietnam launched its final offensive. And when President Ronald Reagan launched a massive military buildup to increase pressure on the Soviet Union, he voted against many of the administration's top priorities.

Notably, Biden voted against the 1991 Gulf War against Iraq. "What vital interests of the United States justify sending Americans to their deaths in the sands of Saudi Arabia?" he asked. He also worried that U.S. troops would unfairly shoulder most of the casualties and that "the enmity of the Arab world" would be directed toward the United States.

Biden's views shifted, however, after the Soviet Union collapsed and the United States attained unipolar dominance. As the ranking Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Biden emerged as a leading proponent of enlarging NATO—a policy that created new, open-ended security commitments for the United States at the time when the "vital interests" involved were highly debatable. He contended that enlargement would guarantee "another 50 years of peace" in Europe as well as redress the "historical injustice" of Stalinist domination in Eastern Europe. Recanting his opposition to the earlier Gulf War, Biden championed U.S.-led military intervention against Serbia in the Bosnian war and the Kosovo crisis. After the 9/11 attacks, Biden voted to authorize the war in Afghanistan and, with some reservations, the war in Iraq. One week into the United States' "shock and awe" campaign, he expressed hope that the invasion would "put Iraq on the path to a pluralistic and democratic society."

Yet once the wars faltered, Biden adapted again. In the face of insurgencies in Afghanistan and Iraq, he grew skeptical of both U.S. state-building missions. In 2006, Biden put forward his most distinctive foreign policy proposal to that point: he advocated dividing Iraq into a federal system along sectarian lines, paving the way for the U.S. military's withdrawal from the country. Without acquiring an antiwar reputation, Biden was looking for an exit from Iraq. Accordingly, he bluntly opposed the U.S. "surge" of troops into Iraq when it was first floated in 2006, describing it as "the absolute wrong strategy."

Biden's opposition to large wars with inflated goals only deepened as vice president. He was nearly alone among President Barack Obama's senior advisers in dissenting from the administration's decision to surge U.S. forces into Afghanistan from 2009 to 2011. Biden reasoned that the U.S.-backed Afghan government had insuperable flaws that made a complete victory over the Taliban insurgency impossible. He instead counseled a narrow counterterrorism mission targeting al Qaeda and related groups.

It is possible Biden wanted to go even further. In his diary, U.S. envoy Richard Holbrooke recounted that Biden wanted to withdraw from Afghanistan entirely. During one particularly contentious debate, Holbrooke recounted Biden yelling, "I am not sending my boy back there to risk his life on behalf of women's rights!" Advancing liberal values at gunpoint, he explained, "just won't work, that's not what [U.S. troops are] there for."

Biden also appears to have been a voice of caution within the Obama administration on other foreign policy debates. He expressed concern about launching the 2011 Navy SEAL raid that ultimately killed Osama bin Laden, suggesting that the United States gather additional intelligence before taking a step that could imperil relations with Pakistan. Biden also claims to have opposed the bombing of Libya that same year. At the time, he publicly urged U.S. NATO allies to take over the mission from the United States. "We can't do it all," Biden said, underscoring that Libya was peripheral to "our strategic interest" in the region.

To Biden's critics, his shifts on foreign policy no doubt seem opportunistic. His supporters, meanwhile, can herald his willingness to learn from experience. But Biden's trajectory from Cold War moderate to liberal-hegemony enthusiast to nation-building skeptic contains a through line: he has always regarded U.S. security as the paramount basis of foreign policy, and has been willing to reassess how to advance American interests in light of new conditions and stubborn realities. And this pragmatic realism may augur even more sweeping changes to American foreign policy now that he resides in the White House.

AFTER AFGHANISTAN

Afghanistan represents the starkest example of Biden's pragmatic realist streak. He ended the war swiftly after concluding that doing so would benefit the United States, heeding the strong preference of the U.S. public and resisting pressure from the Pentagon and many foreign policy elites to renew the U.S. state-building project. In justifying his decision, Biden insisted that U.S. service members should be sent into combat only to defend the United States. As an animated Biden told an interviewer during his presidential campaign, "The responsibility I have is to protect America's national self-interest and not put our women and men in harm's way to try to solve every single problem in the world by use of force."

Afghanistan may be just the beginning. Biden has ordered the Defense Department to conduct a "global posture review" of the United States' forward deployments. If the review acts on the insight of General Mark Milley, the chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, that many existing deployments were "developed during the Cold War," it could recommend a significant restructuring of the U.S. military footprint. The administration has already signaled its intention to "right-size" the U.S. military presence in the Middle East and has recently begun that process by pulling antimissile systems out of Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia. Biden may also become the first president in three decades to avoid the enlargement of NATO: he has soft-pedaled talk of extending NATO membership to Ukraine, although he has continued to send military aid to the country.

To be sure, Biden has often framed U.S. relations with China and Russia in ideological terms. He has vowed to disprove the notion that "autocracy is the wave of the future" by demonstrating the continued vitality of American democratic institutions. Yet Biden's actual policies toward the two powers betray his pragmatic bent. Rather than merge the countries into a single specter of an authoritarian menace, Biden has prioritized competition with a rising China well above that with a weaker Russia. He has aimed to establish a "stable and predictable relationship" with the latter, an approach that seeks to limit bilateral tensions and potentially enable the United States to focus on counterbalancing China.

As he did during the Cold War, Biden has taken steps designed to open the door to negotiated resolutions to disputes with the United States' geopolitical rivals. He chose to hold his first major bilateral summit with Russian President Vladimir Putin and has also signaled his interest in meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping. Diplomacy, he said after his summit with Putin, does not depend on trusting the other party. It requires merely that both sides have mutual interests and establish understandings based on those interests. "This is about self-interest and verification of self-interest," Biden emphasized. "It's just pure business."

At times, Biden's own rhetoric can obscure his most distinctive foreign policy instincts. He has expressed revulsion at Trump for embracing "all the thugs in the world" and vowed that "human rights will be the center of our foreign policy"—a claim that is hard to square with his

unapologetic defense of vital national interests as the sole grounds for war. And in December, he plans to hold the first of two “Summits for Democracy” intended to help the world’s democracies defend against authoritarianism and show they can deliver for their citizens. Contrasted with Trump and his affinity for autocrats, Biden may sound like he is returning to the United States’ muscular promotion of liberalism and democracy abroad.

Still, most of Biden’s statements and actions are consistent with an outlook that puts national security above all other considerations. Likewise, the Summits for Democracy so far do not reflect a substantial effort either to expand U.S. alliances with democracies or to restrict U.S. alliances to liberal states. After all, pro-democracy rhetoric has not precluded the Biden administration from deepening ties with authoritarian states such as Thailand and Vietnam and increasingly illiberal democracies such as India and the Philippines. The summits may simply reflect the fact that Biden supports democracy, liberal values, and human rights—without thinking they should be promoted at the point of a gun or dictate U.S. defense obligations.

RESHAPING AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY

If the Biden administration continues to prize pragmatic realism above liberal primacy, far-reaching changes may be in store for U.S. foreign policy. The security-focused analysis that Biden applied to Afghanistan would also lead to force reductions elsewhere in the world. The thousands of ground troops currently in Iraq and Syria to prevent a future resurgence of the Islamic State (also known as ISIS) are an obvious place to start. Their deployment violates Biden’s stated requirement to “set missions with clear, achievable goals” because success can never be verifiably achieved.

For the same reason, Biden ought to assess whether the United States’ counterterrorism operations are targeting only those groups with the capability and intent to attack the United States. In recent years, the United States has engaged in anti-terror strikes, exercises, and training missions in approximately 85 countries across the globe. Although many efforts targeted al Qaeda and other groups that threaten the U.S. homeland, some targeted organizations such as the Somalia-based al Shabab and groups in the Sahel and Latin America that are less clearly able to attack the United States. If Biden’s assessment yields even a murky result, then he should wind down the “war on terror,” lest he hand an “open-ended mission,” as he described the Afghanistan war, to his successor.

Biden will need to act boldly just to disentangle the United States from the greater Middle East. But at a time when China is rising and the United States requires serious domestic reform, he should think even bigger: his administration can work to cap if not cut U.S. commitments in Europe and avoid an excessively militarized and zero-sum approach in Asia. Unlike his predecessors, he could embrace mounting calls for a European defense force outside American control, so as to pass responsibility for the continent’s security into European hands. And in the Indo-Pacific, despite Biden’s call for “extreme competition” with China, his pragmatic instincts ought to keep him from making an explicit guarantee to defend Taiwan or otherwise enlarging the United States’ already extensive regional commitments.

However, Biden’s pragmatic realism is not a cure-all. On key questions, his foreign policy instincts pull in opposite directions. Biden’s sensitivity to political currents allowed him to end the war in Afghanistan, but the remaining U.S. wars have less public salience, even if their strategic rationale may be no less dubious. Indeed, Biden went along with the Obama administration’s expansion of the war on terror via aerial strikes and commando operations, even

as he soured on nation-building occupations. His pragmatism may keep him from taking political risks that a rigorous realist perspective requires.

Pragmatism could also make Biden move too slowly to shrink outmoded commitments that no longer advance American security. If Europeans can defend themselves, merely maintaining the current size of NATO is not enough—Biden should actively reduce the U.S. role in the alliance. More important, Biden’s all-of-the-above approach toward China—intensifying geopolitical rivalry, welcoming cooperation on common challenges, and preserving room for diplomacy—may seem pragmatic in the short run but may come to look unachievable and undisciplined years in the years ahead. Biden should take advantage of the manageable military threat that China still poses to prioritize diplomatic engagement on such issues as climate change and trade and tamp down on the domestic demonization of China, lest a new cold war take hold.

The opening months of Biden’s presidency have shown that even seasoned politicians are capable of surprises—especially if their hallmark is to change with the times. Biden is certainly no radical. But after decades of foreign policy radicalism that has created a string of disasters, his approach may at least begin to revitalize the United States’ role in the world.

JOSHUA SHIFRINSON is Associate Professor of International Relations at Boston University and the author of *Rising Titans, Falling Giants: How Great Powers Exploit Power Shifts*.

STEPHEN WERTHEIM is Senior Fellow in the American Statecraft Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and the author of *Tomorrow, the World: The Birth of U.S. Global Supremacy*.