

United States: The limits of Biden's plan to "rescue" US foreign policy

Saturday 23 January 2021, by [SELFA Lance](#) (Date first published: 19 January 2021).

During the 2020 election campaign, the Biden camp didn't place much emphasis on how it would conduct U.S. foreign policy. But now that the Biden administration is ready to take power, it's important to assess what the administration's policies to sustaining the U.S. empire will be.

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This is essential for a few reasons. First, despite Biden's unexpected accession to office with Democratic congressional majorities, those majorities will be narrow. Those will constrain what the Biden administration can accomplish through domestically oriented legislation. But the executive is far less constrained – and more likely to 'get what it wants' – in the realm of foreign affairs. Second, Biden, as two-time chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and acknowledgment (however undeservedly) in the foreign policy elite as an "expert," will want to put his stamp on U.S. policy. Third, knowing what Biden plans to do should prepare socialists to understand what we might face in his term in office.

Biden's record isn't very encouraging. He has been one of the key figures over the last generation in helping to erect the neoliberal order, both domestic and international. He was a vocal supporter and congressional enabler of U.S. intervention in the Balkans in the 1990s, of the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan, the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the partition of Iraq into three separate ethno-religious states. He has been a long-time, and generally uncritical, supporter of the state of Israel. As vice president to Barack Obama, he supported a troop surge to Afghanistan, a coup in Honduras and intervention in Syria and Libya.

In other words, Biden's hawkish record—often sanitized with "multi-lateral" or "liberal internationalist" rhetoric—is pretty much that of a mainstream Democrat of the last several decades. If we want to understand what that might mean for a Biden administration, we can start where almost all mainstream presidential candidates explain themselves to the imperial elite: an election year "vision" article in *Foreign Affairs*. Biden's ghost writers didn't disappoint, offering up "Why America Must Lead Again: Rescuing American Foreign Policy After Trump" in the March/April 2020 issue.

In the article, Biden promises: "I will take immediate steps to renew U.S. democracy and alliances, protect the United States' economic future, and once more have the United States lead the world."

His first plank is that “renewing American democracy,” as a way of restoring “the power of our example” (what is often called American “soft power”) in the world. Here, he vows a number of reforms against corruption, global money laundering and Trump’s attacks on democratic norms. He pledges to call a Summit for Democracy to counter a trend to “authoritarianism” in governments around the world.

Second, he calls for a “foreign policy for the middle class,” where some of his domestic agenda, such as a \$15/hour minimum wage or a multi-billion investment in U.S. infrastructure, are proposed as “national security” issues. This is also the place where he homes in on “fair trade,” and particularly, a more focused trade war against China. He calls for a global trade alliance (what he calls a “united front”) against China.

These two steps bring him to the third, and most important, component of his program, folksily headlined “back at the head of the table.” This is the brief for U.S. “leadership” to head off other powers from snatching world domination from the U.S. or letting the world order fall into “chaos.” As part of putting itself in this position, the U.S. will “end forever wars” (like those in Afghanistan), while continuing to carry out military intervention with special forces and drones, Biden explains. It will rejoin treaties, such as the Paris Climate Accord, and international organizations, such as the World Health Organization, from which Trump had withdrawn the U.S. It will continue to provide “ironclad commitment” to Israel and renew the U.S. commitment to NATO.

And in a repurposing of liberal rhetoric for geopolitical aims, he criticizes China’s “Belt and Road” foreign infrastructure investment as “climate destroying”. However much that may be true about a trillion-dollar expenditure on cement and steel, Biden and the U.S. ruling class is far more concerned about “Belt and Road’s” potential to displace the U.S. as a source of foreign aid than it is about the global climate.

In any event, Biden’s attempt to revive his old boss’s “Pivot to Asia” policy of hemming in China is apparent in his pledges to strengthen relations with Asian sub-powers such as Japan, Australia, and India and to revive the Iran nuclear deal that Trump demolished.

A cabinet of insiders

In sum, this is pretty much a brief for the restoration of the Obama Biden status quo ante Trump—a return, in the foreign policy sphere to what Dylan Riley calls “multicultural neoliberalism.” This shows in his appointments of a cohesive group of foreign policy advisers and administrators, most of whom are longstanding Democratic Party foreign policy hands. Many were top lieutenants in Obama’s administration, and top advisers to Hillary Clinton’s failed 2016 presidential campaign. They are now being promoted under Biden.

Most are unremarkable, and like much of Biden’s cabinet, they are being sold to liberals for their racial/ethnic and gender diversity to elide their mainstream, don’t-rock-the-boat politics. To head the Department of Homeland Security, Biden tapped Alejandro Mayorkas, a Cuban-American immigrant and corporate lawyer who helped implement the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program under the Obama administration. For Defense Secretary, Biden appointed Lloyd Austin, an African-American former general who will have to receive a congressional waiver to accept the civilian post so soon after his military retirement. To represent the U.S. in the United Nations, Biden chose Linda Thomas-Greenfield, an African-American woman.

Many of them, most prominently including Secretary of State designate Anthony Blinken support “humanitarian intervention,” or the use of military force to overthrow governments that the U.S.

designates as violators of human rights—a punishment never considered against U.S. allies such as Saudi Arabia or Israel. Avril Haines, his designee for director of national intelligence, is on record defending CIA agents against charges that they tortured suspects in post 9-11 repression. Haines, a former owner of a trendy Baltimore independent bookstore, drew up the Obama administration's legal justifications for its assassinations by drone.

These are just a few examples of a Biden team that may be demographically diverse but is politically mainstream. They are all insiders, having been part of the Washington establishment for decades. Even if Republican senators manage to damage one or two of them during their confirmation hearings, most will sail through.

Liberals took credit for dissuading Biden from appointing Michele Flournoy to head the Defense Department, due to her grifting with a revolvingdoor lobbying firm WestExec, where several Obama officials cashed in on their government service with weapons manufacturers. But even if Flournoy was sidelined, plenty of her associates and others like them will find their way into the Biden administration. As John Feffer of the Institute for Policy Studies commented,

It's not Trump's version of an old boy's network, which featured outright corruption, cronyism, and nepotism. Rather, Biden is bringing back the more familiar inside game of influence-peddling, which is technically legal but morally suspect. WestExec is firmly part of that world. But then, what did you expect, that Biden would nominate people who'd spent the last four years volunteering for Habitat for Humanity rather than profiting from their elite connections? That's not how Washington works.

Biden and the reality of the world

The first few weeks of the Biden administration will be consumed with nomination battles and atmospherics as Biden rejoins the Paris Climate Accord and the WHO. He will change Trump's rhetoric towards the U.S.'s main allies. He may even express support for international cooperation to address the COVID-19 pandemic. But, as always, what he does will be more important than what he says or how he says it. For example, the first concrete pledge he makes in the *Foreign Affairs* article is "to immediately reverse" the Trump administration's family separation policy at the U.S. border. We're hearing from the Biden transition that this action may be pushed back for months. Anyone hoping that the Biden Administration will take bold and unconventional action on behalf of working people will be waiting for a long time.

The bigger question is what to make of Biden's "vision" itself. And here, we can say that it has as much relation to reality as does his belief that Republicans will come to their senses and help him govern in a bipartisan manner.

First, the assumption that the world is just waiting for American leadership again is an example of typical U.S. hubristhat is out of step with the world as it is. Most obviously, the disasters of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq are hardly endorsements of the farsightedness of American leadership. These examples of "U.S. leadership" killed hundreds of thousands, left failed states and a global refugee crisis in their wake, and contributed to the rise of the Islamic State (ISIS) in the Middle East. So, it's not hard to imagine that plenty of countries are saying "no thanks" to Biden's assurances that America "is back" and "ready to lead."

Second, it misunderstands the distribution of world power today. The "unipolar moment" that placed the US as the unchallenged power in the world after the end of the Cold War with the USSR lasted only about 20 years. Since, the disasters in the Middle East, the Great Recession, the rise of China to the world's second largest economy, and now U.S. catastrophic failure in the face of the

global pandemic has made archaic (if not laughable) former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's characterization of the U.S. as the world's "indispensable nation". As Olivier Zajec, writing in *Le Monde Diplomatique*, recently put it: "China is now strong enough to offer its partners—who may wish to 'board the express train of [China's] development' in the words of Xi Jinping, so warmly applauded at the World Economic Forum in Davos in 2017—an alternative framework for geopolitical and geoeconomic socialisation to that proposed by the US."

Four years of Trump has led U.S. allies to seek their own deals with China, Russia, and other powers because they don't trust the U.S. It's not clear that they're going to completely reverse course now that Biden is in the White House. "This outward-looking exceptionalism fails to notice the growing divide between the role the US claims for itself and the real extent of its power," Zajec wrote. "Almost nobody is listening anymore."

Third, the ability to make any of this happen depends on a level of domestic consensus that doesn't exist. The aftermath of the January 6 far-right storming of the U.S. Capitol will only confirm that. It also begs the question about the rot inside US society—that the pandemic has exposed—that makes any grand plans, either foreign or domestic, unachievable. The U.S. elite aligned with Biden seems to want to wish away these problems. But they ultimately stem from the realignment of world economic and political power that has reshuffled relations among the leading capitalist powers.

Biden, Trump, and the future

Biden wants to draw a sharp contrast with Trump, but their foreign policies share similar assumptions, especially that of seeing China as the U.S.'s main competitor, economically and militarily, in the future. Trump tried to push China with his ham-fisted tariff policies—policies that Biden has said he will retain. Biden is repackaging Trump's aggressive anti-China posture with rhetoric about multilateralism (e.g., the "united front" with the EU) and industrial policy ("Build Back Better"). As with every U.S. president who pledges to provide the U.S. military with "all the support it needs," Biden has already hinted that he would be willing to increase the Pentagon's budget from Trump's already obscene levels.

And from the point of view of U.S. "soft power," what's the difference between Trump's "America first" and Biden's "America should lead the world"? Between "Make America great again" and "America is back." Atmospherics.

Trump grasped in a way that the neoliberal elite doesn't that the average person cares more about their own standard of living than they do about abstractions like "free trade" or "global governance." The Trumpists' policies may make things worse for working people, but they identified a problem that the neoliberal elite for too long ignored.

Whatever else one could say about the Trump administration, its approach to U.S. military intervention overseas did not differ much from that of the Obama administration. Remember the "freakout" in 2018/2019 across the political establishment, that led to Defense Secretary James Mattis's resignation, when Trump announced the withdrawal of US forces from Syria? Knowing that many of the people in Biden's administration are liberal hawks and that they are looking to push back against China and Russia, it's possible that the Biden administration could stumble into a war. Moreover, as the Uruguayan anti-capitalist journalist Raúl Zibechi has pointed out, the Biden administration may also be more willing than Trump to unleash "color revolutions" to assure itself of pro-U.S. governments in Latin America.

Biden will be less antagonistic to US allies than Trump was. And the administration will speak more

openly about global problems such as the pandemic and climate change. But whether they will be able to make substantive change on these policies is questionable, even if their neoliberal approaches could work. Policies that require large-scale buy-in from Congress are likely to go nowhere. Biden will find it difficult to reestablish the Iran nuclear agreement, especially since Israel and Saudi Arabia, the main U.S. allies in the region will sabotage those efforts. Likewise, seeing how the Democrats got shellacked in South Florida in November, Biden will probably pull back from further rapprochement with Cuba.

The end of Trump's chaotic rule won't change the fact that many of same sources of global "instability" that faced Trump will face Biden. The pandemic will continue to wreak havoc worldwide. A global refugee crisis will continue. And even if, as expected, the world economy recovers, it will not return to even the levels it reached in 2019 or 2020 before the pandemic hit with full force. With so many potential international problems and conflicts, the liberal "internationalists" in Biden's administration may be tempted to intervene in ways that the Trump administration wouldn't have.

The tasks for anti-imperialists won't change with the change of administrations. We recognize the Biden administration as presenting a different way of managing the U.S. empire from Trump's. But it differs more in style than in substance. We will continue to stand with those fighting against U.S. imperial policies, from Palestine to Central America, and we will have to resist any efforts to whip up a "cold war" against China, especially in the labor movement.

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P.S.

- International Socialism Project. January 19, 2021 1:36 PM:
<https://internationalsocialism.net/the-limits-of-bidens-plan-to-rescue-us-foreign-policy/>
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