IDEAS

The Fraught Politics Facing Biden's Foreign Policy

His presidency may be the establishment's last best chance to demonstrate that liberal internationalism is a superior strategy to populist nationalism.

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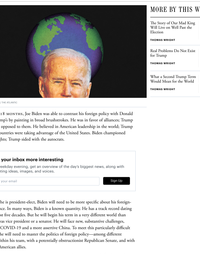

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IN 1947 NOTES, Joe Biden was able to constrain his foreign policy with Donald Trump's by painting in broad brushstrokes. He was in favor of alliances; Trump was opposed to them. He believed in American leadership in the world; Trump thought countries were taking advantage of the United States. Biden championed human rights; Trump sided with the autocrats.

Now that he is president-elect, Biden will need to be more specific about his foreign policy stance. In many ways, Biden's is a known quantity. He has a track record dating back almost five decades. But he will begin his term in a very different world than when he was vice president or a senator. He will face new, substantive challenges, including COVID-19 and a more assertive China. To meet this particularly difficult moment, he will need to master the politics of foreign policy—among different factions within his team, with a potentially obstructionist Republican Senate, and with skeptical American allies.

Biden cannot simply rely on competent technocratic management in foreign policy. His presidency may be the establishment's last best chance to demonstrate that liberal internationalism is a superior strategy to populist nationalism. He must consider the strategic options generated by an ideologically diverse team, and he has to make key choices that are unusual in the politics of the moment, in the United States and around the world. Such a bold path is not one that a newly elected president with no foreign policy experience could take. But he can.

To understand how Biden might approach his foreign policy, I spoke with half a dozen Biden advisers and people who worked closely with him in the Obama administration, as well as current and former congressional staff, Trump administration officials, and allied diplomats. I agreed not to identify them by name, to ensure their candor.

Within Biden's team, an ongoing, but largely overlooked, debate has been brewing among Democratic centrists about the future of U.S. foreign policy. One group, which I call "internationists," favors a foreign policy broadly consistent with that of President Barack Obama. They believe in careful management of the great U.S.-China rivalry, but are cautious and increasingly wary. They will step up to China but will be more selective than Obama was in choosing battlegrounds. They want to avoid a cold war or a bilateral competition with Beijing on climate change, global public health, and other issues. They support Biden's idea for a summit of democracies, aimed at repairing democracy and encouraging cooperation, but are worried about a confrontation between democracy and authoritarianism. They favor a return to the Iran nuclear deal and intend to continue to play America's traditional role in the Middle East. They generally support free-trade deals and embrace globalization.

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A second group, which I call "retrenchers," challenges key orthodoxies from the Obama era. Philosophically, these advisers believe that U.S. foreign policy needs to fundamentally change. If it is to deal with the underlying forces of Trumpism and nationalist populism. They are more willing than internationists to take calculated risks in competition with China, including on technology and trade, and to treat China as the administration's defining challenge and favor a more competitive approach than Obama's. They view competition with other free societies as a central component of U.S. foreign policy, even if these partnerships result in slower, less authoritarian allies that are not particularly vital. They want to make Iran troublesome overall and are more willing to use leverage against Iran and Gulf Arab states in the hopes of securing an agreement to replace the Iran nuclear deal. They favor significant changes to climate economic policy, focusing on renewable energy, cybersecurity and data sharing, industrial policy, and technology rather than traditional free-trade agreements.

Biden's worldview is broad enough to be compatible with the internationist and reformist schools of thought. He obviously retains many of Obama's advisers and is proud of the administration's record. At the same time, he chaffed against Obama's caution and internationalism—for example, Biden wanted to send lethal assistance to Ukraine, when Obama did not. Biden has spoken more explicitly than Obama about competition with China and Russia, and he favors a foreign policy that works for the middle class. It is important to note that the legitimate and substantive disagreements between internationists and retrenchers are overshadowed by the fierce debate with others. Prominent neocons appear to be the same that the were Iraqis backward, but is not intended to be, Obama's foreign policy was successful in many respects, and the case for restoring it is reasonable, as is the case for significant departures from it. Some officials are also nonsentimental on particular issues and reformist on others.

The progressives who sidled over now ground on foreign policy during the primary campaign will be a significant force inside the Democratic Party in a Biden administration. Progressives believe foreign policy should primarily serve domestic economic and political goals. They are skeptical of high defense spending and want to destabilize U.S. foreign policy, but they are also alarmed by the rise of autocracy globally and want to push back against it. Several Biden advisers, in particular Jake Sullivan and Tony Blinken, made a special effort to engage progressives from the Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders campaigns after the primary. Now that the election is over, progressives mainly focused on domestic politics are very much inside the new dispong Biden's economic agenda, but even a foreign policy that would have adopted a more confrontational approach toward the Biden team, hoping to pressure it from the outside on China, Iran, and defense spending.

Biden decided on these contrasting perspectives as assets, and presumably create a team that reflects the broader foreign policy debate and avoids groupthink. But he will need to actively manage the different views. He should start by learning lessons from Obama, who in 2012, Obama chose John Kerry to be his second secretary of state because he was the chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, was an old friend, and was a good Democratic loyalist. Kerry was a strong advocate of arms control and other foreign policy accomplishments in his first term, was the prime mover behind the Iran nuclear deal, but Kerry wanted to prove back. Obama returned to a Middle East, contrary to his Department, seemingly without intending to do so. Blinken, then Kerry's deputy, was left to manage America's alliances in Asia—something that he did effectively and that might fall to him now.

Similarly, Biden could unintentionally create a uniformly Obamian worldview in his national security team, unless he purposefully decides to go another route. Biden's governing goal should be a genuinely intellectually honest process in which fundamental assumptions and policies of internationist, reformist, and progressive ideas are constantly stress-tested and assessed with an open mind. This process needs to be outcome-oriented and not derailed into the "team meetings" mindset that creates gridlock and tends toward the lowest common denominator. Biden needs a variety of strategic choices. As a seasoned foreign policy leader, he is ideally positioned to adjudicate this debate and to choose among the options that it will present.

Continue reading at "The crisis of American democracy is not static."

Biden should certainly entrust senior positions to people who tend toward the Obamian worldview, but he should also find roles for people who might advocate for a more radical approach. Some Democratic centrists, such as Michael Froman and former officials Julie Sullivan, Tom Nides, Nathan Nakel, Kurt Campbell, and others who have written or spoken in favor of major policy changes since 2016. Sullivan is likely to take a domestic policy job, but given his role in developing strategic options over the next four years, it is important that he also remains an influential voice on national security, and he is well positioned to help contract the domestic to the foreign. Given the substantive nature of the debate thus far and that it has generally been amicable, an ideologically diverse Cabinet should bring out the best in all factions, sharpening thinking and policy options.

DESPITE WELL THERE a variety of ideas because he faces significant political challenges at home. By any metric, Biden certainly has a mandate. He won 306 electoral votes and more popular votes than any president in history. However, the election was not the sweeping repudiation of Trump that Democrats crowd. Trumpism has not gone away and instead appears to have transformed the Republican Party into a force for populist nationalism, including hostility toward international cooperation and skepticism about alliances.

The Republicans are well positioned to retain control of the Senate following the two runoffs in Georgia in January. If Mitch McConnell repeats the obstructionist role he played in the Obama administration, he could kill Biden's domestic agenda on arrival. Many Biden Democrats believe that a successful foreign policy requires bipartisan at home, so McconnEll's tactics may be a big problem. Republicans will likely put Biden's nominees through tenacious hearings, and they may be willing to reject appointees, particularly at the subcabinet level.

All Democrats and many Republicans agree on the need to repair and strengthen America's alliances and partnerships, but this is more complicated than the campaign rhetoric made it appear. The year 2021 will not be like 2009, when Obama was widely greeted as a conquering hero, restoring the United Place after a dreary eight years in office, simply because of what his election signified. The world is a less cooperative and liberal place than it was then, and there are more populist governments in Brazil and India and the erosion of democracy in Turkey and Hungary.

America's closest allies will all work with Biden and welcome the end of Trump's eruptions, but they have lingering doubts about where things are headed. The Australian and Japanese governments, for example, are quietly concerned about Biden's approach to China and are watching his early appointments very closely. The French President Emmanuel Macron, Angela Merkel of Germany, and other leaders in the Middle East and from the war on terrorism more broadly so that they can press on the China challenge. The British are wondering whether Biden will invest in their special relationship, given that he opposed Brexit. Several officials I spoke with from America's allies in Europe and Asia have reservations about the planned summit of democracies that Biden made a centerpiece of his election. They worry that the meeting might become an end in itself and be too inwardly focused and beset by problems about which countries qualify as democracies.

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These efforts would lay the groundwork for crucial elements of Biden's Build Back Better domestic program: targeted infrastructure investments, including clean technology and industrial policy to compete with China on 5G, quantum computing, and artificial intelligence; a limited and strategic decoupling from China in certain areas; and bolstering the resilience of the U.S. economy to external shocks, which would include making supply chains more secure.

Although some in Biden Land support this bipartisan give-and-take, others, including many of the retrenchments, are very skeptical of using competition with China as a framework for U.S. foreign and domestic policy. Some share Iran substantive reservations about any decoupling from China. They expect China to reach out for a deal with the U.S. to avoid a cold war, and they believe climate change—and would like to explore opportunities for cooperation. Some are also progressives who also generally opposed to building Biden's foreign policy around a competition with China, believing that the strategy risks creating a Cold War.

These tensions and pragmatic fears are meritless. Almost all of these early measures are about enhancing domestic competitiveness, not engaging in an arms race or a clash of civilizations. Indeed, Elizabeth Warren advocated for domestic reforms to compete with China during her presidential campaign. Domestic programs are much more clear than their foreign policy counterparts to support the conceptual framework if it unlocks the politics of an ambitious domestic agenda, which will include new jobs through investments in clean technology—a vital part of a climate policy.

Getting serious about competing with China is also justified on the merits. Xi Jinping's China has become more dictatorial and aggressive. Even the European Union, which is about as benign a geopolitical actor as China could hope for, has all but given up hope that engagement and competition will change China or fundamentally moderate its behavior, even on shared interests such as global public health. Cooperation with China on shared interests should occur, but we need to be realistic about the limits. To prevent competition with China from spiraling into outright confrontation, Biden should situate the strategy as part of a larger alternative vision for strengthening the free world. This policy would include making free societies more resilient to external shocks such as pandemics and economic crises, fighting corruption and kleptocracy, and building democracy institutions that try to buffer or correct distortions, and coordinating democracies. This approach would be more effective than organizing a global summit of democracies.

The inescapable political reality in Washington is that competition with China is the only way to persuade a Trumpian Republican Party of the benefits of international cooperation—whether through alliances protecting a counterweight to Chinese power, or through the United Nations, where Democrats could persuade Republicans to stop relying on international law to prevent Chinese revisionism in the South China Sea. Without the China component, Biden has no hope of covering any kind of democratic consensus around internationalism.

After addressing the China issue, Biden should deadweight U.S. foreign policy against the return of Trumpism in 2025. Republican senators may hope to harness populism and nationalism, but they will be wary of any international commitments or treaties. Why not codify their support by introducing legislation that requires congressional approval of the United States is to leave NATO? Biden could proactively build relationships in the alliance system by supporting EU security and defense cooperation, even if the action risks a duplication with NATO. Biden should also press Congress to enact new commitment mentoins on presidents—for instance on their ability to circumvent the confirmation and security clearance procedures for appointees to prevent a recurrence of Trump's abuses of power. On climate change, he must prioritize carbon-emission cuts at the state and city levels, which are less likely to be stopped or reversed by Congress.

In managing relationships with allies, Biden cannot rely only on shared problems to bring them closer. He must also engage those leaders on their terms, paying special interest to their political situation and priorities. It would be a disaster if France were to fall into the hands of Marine Le Pen's National Rally in 2022, so Biden should bolster President Emmanuel Macron, including by showing solidarity with France in the face of a domestic terrorism threat. He should make a genuine effort to help Britain extricated itself from Brexit, as long as it respects the obligations under the Good Friday Agreement. Biden should foster a bipartisan consensus on China with Japan and Australia.

Managing nondemocratic allies—including Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Hungary, and the Philippines—is more difficult. They will try to pose him as a tyre-fit flirting with Russia and China. Biden won't succeed by appealing to the better angels of their nature, and he should not expect to change their behavior. He should demand that they pay their way and behave. Biden must be feared by the so-called strongmen before he can be respected by them. He must show that he is willing to push back and that he can wield power and generate leverage more effectively than Obama. He must introduce red lines that cannot be crossed. Only then can transactional cooperation on matters of mutual interest really occur.

Biden's election is a reprieve from Trumpism. Whether that break is permanent or temporary depends very much on the choices that Biden makes. Biden must act with a degree of urgency and boldness to demonstrate that his brand of liberal internationalism effectively addresses the real concerns and anxieties Americans have about the world.

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