



In Charge, But not in Control: Biden's Foreign Policy

James D. Boys analyses President Biden's foreign policy during his first year in office – and finds more problems than solutions.

An American President prevaricating in the face of Russian aggression, facing questions about his age, mental agility and ability to win a second term, facing concerns about his family's overseas business dealings, at odds with his vice president, unwilling to hold regular press conferences, and with

dangerously low favourability ratings. Nope, this isn't Donald Trump, but Joe Biden in early 2022.

Biden was the man elected to restore American credibility on the world stage. But assessments of US foreign policy during his first year in office have tended to fall into one of two categories: damned outright by his opponents, and damned

with faint praise by his supporters. Those who embraced Trump's 'America First' approach have found little to commend in the new administration, while those who celebrated Trump's departure from office have scrambled to find any significant benefits from Biden's first year in office, other than his reversal of Trump's excesses. Either way, US foreign policy during the first 12 months of the Biden presidency has been less than triumphant, however one examines it.

International challenges

The Biden administration's challenges flow from three central issues: its people, its policies, and its presentation. In many ways, the President's administration still feels as though it is waiting to get started, despite already being a quarter of the way through its term in office. The current national security team lacks gravitas and do not appear up to the job. The overriding impression is of a similarity with Bill Clinton's first-term team who were likewise experienced but ineffectual. Like their predecessors Warren Christopher and Anthony Lake, Secretary of State Tony Blinken and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, both have deputy-level executive branch experience under previous Democratic administrations. Both men, however, feel like third-string players brought onto the field in a desperate attempt to fill shoes that are far too large for them. The Vice President, Kamala Harris, has likewise done little to assist the White House, seemingly spending more time lamenting her portfolio assignments and hemorrhaging staff, rather than proffering solutions to the problems she has been assigned to address.

If Biden's appointees appear to be underwhelming, his policies seem to lack focus or direction. It must be noted, of course, that in recent decades US foreign policy has swung on a partisan pendulum, ensuring that one party spends its time in office apologising for and reversing the acts of its predecessor. Just as Obama sought global forgiveness for the excesses of the Bush era, and Trump sought to airbrush Obama from history, so now Biden is busy reversing Trump-era policies. This is most apparent regarding the Paris Climate Accords, the Keystone XL pipeline, and negotiations with Iran regarding arms control. Little wonder that US international leadership has diminished in recent years given such frenetic policy undulations. Although the Biden administration released an *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* in March 2021, ahead of the full report that is expected in 2022, there appears to be little that is grand in

the US 'grand strategy' at present.

The lack of strategic thinking in the Biden administration was evident in the withdrawal from Afghanistan. Despite the move being welcome in principle, its implementation was poorly handled, resulting not only in death and chaos, but also in the diminution of US prestige at a time when it could ill-afford to lose further ground against its international competitors. President Biden emerged personally diminished and the Taliban, having withstood the US for two decades, emerged to retake what they had controlled prior to the 2001 invasion. Likewise, the AUKUS trilateral security pact between the US, UK and Australia, itself a valid development, was poorly implemented, causing international embarrassment and furthering the impression of incompetence at the White House.

Basic problems

Beyond these three areas of concern is the broader problem of Biden's inability to impose himself on the world, or to provide a sense of international leadership in the face of rising challenges from Russia and China. He does not appear to have forged a close working relationship with any foreign leaders, or to have an identifiable idea of where to position the United States on the world stage. The new German Chancellor has visited the White House but has yet to make an impression. Downing Street is in flux, but the current administration's term in office appears secure until the end of its mandate in May 2024, irrespective of whoever the prime minister may be. Yet the 'special relationship' with the United Kingdom appears stalled under President Biden. At the time of his election, fears emerged that he was pro-Irish and by extension, antagonistic towards Westminster. As America's second Catholic president, such concerns were perhaps to be expected, but to date, very little of substance has emerged one way or the other: No US-UK trade deal, but no dramatic flourishing of Dublin-Washington relations either. Interactions with neither country have seemingly bolstered Biden's standing in the world.

The challenges of personnel and policy are compounded by basic problems with presentation. The débâcle in Afghanistan, and over the roll-out of AUKUS were both exacerbated by the terrible way these issues were presented to the world by a communications team that appear incapable of adequately coordinating a unified message.

Biden has continued the dubious tradition of appointing top donors to key diplomatic posts, ensuring that ambassadorships to London and other high-profile embassies merely go to the highest bidders or, in the case of Japan, to Rahm Emanuel, who is known to be anything but diplomatic. Serious times call for serious people, and the international mission of the United States is poorly served when it is represented overseas by partisan amateurs with more money than sense. These ambassadors will be of little help as Biden seeks to govern at a time of international flux and evolving crises.

Lack of leadership

The gravest crisis of Biden's presidency now centres on Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and the potential for a cascade effect, a catastrophe that has been years in the making. In 2012, Mitt Romney was mocked for suggesting that Russia, not global warming, was the greatest threat to US national security. Since then, Putin has gained a strangle-hold on power and witnessed a succession of weak American presidents whose actions have emboldened Putin to believe that he can act with impunity. Obama's retreat from his 'red-line' pledges regarding the use of chemical weapons in Syria, the timid response to Russian attempts to impact the 2016 presidential election, Trump's pandering to the Kremlin, and Biden's botched withdrawal from Afghanistan will have done little to convince Putin otherwise. The great success of the Nixon era, the triangular diplomacy that divided the Soviet Union from China, leading to détente and an era of US-Soviet/Russian dialogue, has not only ended, but has been put into reverse in recent years, a process

that shows no sign of abating under Biden.

In this era, it is perhaps unsurprising that authoritarian regimes appear to dominate, relying as they can on state-controlled media to quell internal dissent and project an image of cohesion that eludes the west in general and the United States in particular. Both Russia and China also benefit from a vital attribute that structurally eludes the United States: long-established leadership that can implement long-term goals. In this regard, Biden is again at a disadvantage as the oldest elected American President to date, with seemingly no great ambition or overarching sense of direction. He may wish to 'Build Back Better', but beyond such slogans there is no drive, momentum, or indication as to what 'better' would look like or constitute.

Living in the United States at this time affords an entirely different perspective on the country as a global actor than can ever be appreciated living in Europe. From afar, the US is viewed through the prism of one's home nation, and how that relationship impacts your own country. Living here, however, makes one fully aware just how disengaged most Americans are with the rest of the world, and how ignorant many of its leaders are with anything that transpires outside their own narrow constituency. The national media all too often fail to cover international affairs at all, and what coverage there is leaves a great deal to be desired. Many here know or seemingly care little about what lies beyond their shore, since this is a country that many have escaped to and wish to know little of what their ancestors left behind. As a result, to many Americans, foreign affairs are simply not a matter of concern, merely something happening to other people a long way away. There remains little to gain politically from a U.S. military engagement in Ukraine if it results in higher gas prices at a time of souring inflation and increasing taxation. After two decades of flawed foreign interventions, Americans have little interest in getting involved in another conflict that has no apparent bearing on US national security.

Biden's foreign policy at the end of year one appears to be totally reactive; reactive to Trump's legacy and reactive to events beyond his control. This may change, but at the moment there is little sign of an emerging Biden doctrine, and the longer he waits, the less likely one is to be espoused.

The Biden doctrine?

Biden's foreign policy at the end of year one, therefore, appears to be totally reactive; reactive to Trump's legacy and reactive to events beyond his control. This may change, but at the moment there is little sign of an emerging Biden doctrine, and the longer he waits, the less likely one is to be espoused. At present his administration is treading water, but not gaining traction. No one can say with any real certainty if Biden will run for re-election, ensuring that the focus remains on his Vice President and the job that she is, or isn't doing. The November mid-terms will be a turning point one way or the other and will determine the fate of the Biden presidency. If he decides to seek a second term, it will consume his attention to the detriment of international affairs. If he doesn't, national and international attention will turn immediately to thoughts of his successor, leaving him as an ineffectual lame-duck for the remainder of his term.

A year ago, as Joe Biden assumed executive power in the United States, many around the world were relieved to see the peaceful transfer of power occur in the aftermath of a tumultuous transition period and a preceding four years that had been

anything but tranquil. Although many had feared the worst regarding the Trump presidency, the United States remained a member of NATO and the United Nations, and no foreign wars had been instigated. Traditions and institutions had been tested but had prevailed, as the 'Madman Theory' many feared Trump would initiate was not fully implemented.

Twelve months later, simply not being Donald Trump is no longer sufficient. It was just enough to get Biden elected in 2020, when he emerged from a weak field of Democrat candidates to overcome the most polarising President in US history in the midst of a deadly pandemic, but it is insufficient a year into his administration. Perhaps the best that can be said of Biden's first year on the world stage is that it could have been worse, but that's hardly sufficient when faced with the challenges the United States faces in the third decade of this new millennium.

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