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America and the World—The Effects of the Trump Presidency

Joe Biden, American Democracy, and the China Challenge

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President Joe Biden has called the current moment an “inflection point,” both domestically and internationally.² In the aftermath of the 2020 presidential election, some forces within the Republican Party have made clear that they no longer believe democracy is in the best interests of their party. Rather than adjusting their message and policies to broaden their base of support, many in the GOP have doubled down in support of baseless claims of electoral fraud to enact voter suppression laws in the hopes of increasing their odds of success at the ballot box in the 2022 midterm elections and beyond.³

Meanwhile, although Biden defeated Donald Trump last fall, the American people did vote Trump into office in 2016, after a campaign in which he espoused foreign policy views that were completely at odds with those that had been mainstream for both parties in the seven decades after World War II. Biden and his team worry about the continued appeal of Trump’s approach to many Americans. With alarm, Biden and his advisers had watched Trump’s diatribes against America’s closest democratic allies and his frenzied rallies about the need to put “America first” as he went about undermining and withdrawing from a range of multilateral institutions and agreements.

President Biden has thus framed the primary domestic and global fault line as a competition between democracy and autocracy.⁴ He talks about demonstrating that democracies can deliver for all of their citizens, not just a wealthy few (through broad-based economic growth, the provision of COVID-19 vaccines, and sought-after infrastructure improvements, for example). If democracies fail to deliver, Biden fears that the trend toward authoritarianism at home and abroad will continue; Freedom House reports that across the globe freedom has declined for fifteen consecutive years.⁵ The president and his team also have emphatically declared that America is back as the leader of the

¹ The author is grateful to Lucy Seavey for research assistance and to Agneska Bloch and Elizabeth Saunders for their helpful comments.

² Joseph R. Biden, Jr., *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance*, Washington, D.C.: The White House, March 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>.

³ For President Biden’s remarks on this subject, see Remarks by President Biden on Protecting the Sacred, Constitutional Right to Vote, July 13, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/07/13/remarks-by-president-biden-on-protecting-the-sacred-constitutional-right-to-vote/>.

⁴ Hal Brands, “The Emerging Biden Doctrine: Democracy, Autocracy, and the Defining Clash of Our Time,” *Foreign Affairs*, June 29, 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-06-29/emerging-biden-doctrine>; Thomas Wright, “Joe Biden Worries That China Might Win,” *The Atlantic*, June 09, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2021/06/joe-biden-foreign-policy/619130/>.

⁵ Sarah Repucci and Amy Slipowitz, “Democracy under Siege,” Freedom House, 2021, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2021/democracy-under-siege>.

world's democracies, working through multilateral institutions to maintain a "rules-based" international order, by which they mean one in which the democracies, not the autocracies, set the rules.⁶

With American backing for democracy on the line at home and abroad and searching for ways to broaden support among the American people for a strategy of international engagement, Biden and his team have responded with a "foreign policy for the middle class" that is focused on rebuilding ties to America's democratic allies and partners to combat the challenge to the country's prosperity and security posed by China, the globe's leading authoritarian power.⁷ Biden's approach toes a fine line: he wants to build support for his foreign policy among American workers without fueling fears among allies and partners that his policy will be no different than Trump's 'America First' strategy and thus will seek to protect the U.S. economy from international competition. Biden also wants harness the bipartisan domestic political consensus behind the belief that China poses the primary geostrategic threat to American interests in order to get key legislation passed, even as he needs to pursue cooperation with Beijing to combat climate change, one of the administration's top objectives. It is also an objective of paramount importance to the progressive wing of the party, which is concerned about the impact of the competition with China on this issue.⁸

A Foreign Policy for the Middle Class

After the 2016 election, a bipartisan group of former U.S. officials that included Salman Ahmed, who joined the Biden administration as the State Department Director of Policy Planning, and Jake Sullivan, who became Biden's national security adviser, sought to understand how middle-class Americans viewed foreign policy in the hopes of informing a strategy of global engagement that would receive broad-based popular support. Working under the auspices of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the group released a report in 2020 after extensive meetings with voters in Nebraska, Ohio, and Colorado.⁹ In formulating what they described as "a foreign policy for the middle class," the Carnegie group rejected three competing approaches: 1990s-style liberal internationalism, which they defined as assuming that promoting U.S. business interests and American values would help the middle class; the Trumpist America First approach, which they saw as taking a zero-sum view of the world and through protectionist policies promoted some middle-class interests over others; and the Democratic Party's progressive wing's goal of cutting U.S. defense spending in order to focus on economic, social, and racial justice and climate change. Instead, the authors argued that

a foreign policy that works better for the middle class would preserve the benefits of business dynamism and trade openness—which does not feature prominently enough in the progressive agenda—while massively increasing public investment to enhance U.S. competitiveness, resilience, and equitable economic growth. It would sustain U.S. leadership in the world, but harness it toward less ambitious ends, eschewing regime change and the transformation of other nations through military interventions. And it would recognize that a foreign policy that works for the middle class has to be connected to a domestic policy that works for the middle class.¹⁰

A big take-away from the Carnegie report is the dependence on defense-sector jobs in so many communities across America. A foreign policy for the middle class in their view is thus explicitly opposed to the kinds of cuts in defense spending that the progressive wing of the Democratic Party has called for. But a strong defense is not simply about middle-class jobs. The report states that

⁶ Anne Gearan, "In Foreign Policy, Biden Adopts Elements from Former Boss Obama – and from Former Rival Trump," *The Washington Post*, April 26, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/biden-foreign-policy-100-days/2021/04/24/453a1fac-a216-11eb-85fc-06664ff4489d_story.html.

⁷ Remarks by President Biden on America's Place in the World, February 4, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/02/04/remarks-by-president-biden-on-americas-place-in-the-world/>.

⁸ See Alexander Ward, "Biden's New Cold War with China Will Result in Climate Collapse, Progressives Warn," *Politico*, July 07, 2021, <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/07/07/biden-china-climate-collapse-progressives-498588>.

⁹ Salman Ahmed, Wendy Cutler, Rozlyn Engel, David Gordon, Jennifer Harris, Douglas Lute, Daniel M. Price, Christopher Smart, Jake Sullivan, Ashely J. Tellis, Tom Wyler, *Making U.S. Foreign Policy Work Better for the Middle Class* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2020), <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/09/23/making-u.s.-foreign-policy-work-better-for-middle-class-pub-82728>.

¹⁰ *Making U.S. Foreign Policy Work Better for the Middle Class*, 5.

Given the high stakes involved, the United States must seek to deter major power conflict and ensure freedom of access in all major arteries of global commerce. To do that, the U.S. military will need to retain dominance within the global commons and sustain alliances that provide critical platforms to project power globally—even though the Chinese will often construe these measures as hostile.¹¹

The effort to retain military dominance and utilize alliances for power projection has been standard fare for American foreign policy since the end of the Cold War and is now being adapted for the competition with China. The Biden foreign policy approach led Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders to complain, “It is distressing and dangerous...that a fast-growing consensus is emerging in Washington that views the U.S.-Chinese relationship as a zero-sum economic and military struggle.”¹²

The Nature of the U.S.-China Competition

The China challenge is broad and deep: it ranges from unfair trade practices and human rights violations, to threats to cyber networks and supply chains, to efforts to coerce and intimidate American allies and partners in the region and beyond.

The Cold War’s end led us to believe that these types of global competitions are to be won or lost, and such language infuses the way the Biden administration talks about the future. To gain Congressional support for its legislative priorities, the administration stresses the need to win the competition. For example, the White House fact sheet on the Bipartisan Infrastructure Framework for example declares that “the Framework will position American workers, farmers, and businesses – small and large alike – to compete and win in the 21st century.”¹³ Secretary of State Antony Blinken similarly argued that “It’s difficult to imagine the United States winning the long-term strategic competition with China if we cannot lead the renewable energy revolution.”¹⁴

Perhaps a better term for the relationship going forward is strategic rivalry. Each will pursue its interests, find areas where cooperation is possible, while engaging in a military, economic, and technological rivalry that likely won’t end as the Cold War did—with one system vanquished and the other victorious—but rather will become a set of indefinite challenges. Conflict will define the relationship, but fears of the existential threat of climate change will join the avoidance of nuclear war as fueling a need for cooperation even among rivals. Some may argue that the eventual demise of the Soviet system demonstrates that the United States does not have to settle for indefinite great power rivalry. But the events in Europe in 1989-91 may have created an illusion that other competing powers are bound to collapse and disappear if only Americans put enough effort into proving the superiority of their political and economic system.

The primary goals of any presidential administration are to promote the security and prosperity of the United States, with the now additional burden of doing so in a way that ensures the sustainability of the planet. The American people should expect a prolonged period of rivalry with a country that defines its interests very differently, that will pose significant challenges to American interests and values across a wide spectrum, and whose leadership may be able to maintain one-party rule for an extended period of time. White House Indo-Pacific coordinator Kurt Campbell has talked of possible coexistence between the United States and China without war lasting for a generation or more, which may be less satisfying than talk about winning, but provides Americans with a sense of the likely longevity of this rivalry.¹⁵ China is not the Soviet Union, which was always threatened as a political unit by its nationalities problem and whose political leadership could not sustain economic growth during a period of technological change. China is ruthlessly carrying out a genocide

¹¹ *Making U.S. Foreign Policy Work Better for the Middle Class*, 27.

¹² Bernie Sanders, “Washington’s Dangerous New Consensus on China,” *Foreign Affairs*, June 17, 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2021-06-17/washingtons-dangerous-new-consensus-china>.

¹³ “FACT SHEET: President Biden Announces Support for the Bipartisan Infrastructure Framework,” The White House, issued June 24, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/06/24/fact-sheet-president-biden-announces-support-for-the-bipartisan-infrastructure-framework/>.

¹⁴ Antony J. Blinken, “Tackling the Crisis and Seizing the Opportunity: America’s Global Climate Leadership,” Speech, Remarks at the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, April 19, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-remarks-to-the-chesapeake-bay-foundation-tackling-the-crisis-and-seizing-the-opportunity-americas-global-climate-leadership/>.

¹⁵ David Brunnstrom and Humeyra Pamuk, “China, U.S. Can Coexist in Peace but Challenge Is Enormous – White House,” *Reuters*, July 6, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china-us-can-coexist-peace-challenge-enormous-white-house-2021-07-06/>.

against Uyghurs and other minorities in Xinjiang, and its political system has enabled entrepreneurship to flourish despite one-party control.¹⁶ And unlike that of the Soviet Union, China's economy is deeply intertwined with the American economy and those of its allies.

Avoiding a Major Crisis Outside of the Indo-Pacific

Talk of rebalancing and focusing U.S. foreign policy toward the Indo-Pacific isn't new; it informed the thinking of the Clinton, George W. Bush, Obama, and Trump administrations, all of which viewed major opportunities and challenges emanating from that region as eclipsing traditional areas of focus like Europe and the Middle East in their importance to American interests. In an attempt to learn from the past, the Biden team is determined not to be distracted from its focus on the China challenge by conflicts or crises in other parts of the world.

It is striking to compare U.S. foreign policy today to that of the end of the Cold War. Thirty years ago, Europe and Russia were at the center of U.S. foreign policy, as they had been throughout the post-World War II period (even though the major American wars of the Cold War occurred in Asia). As Communist regimes crumbled, the United States saw an opportunity to 'fix' the problems Europe posed during the twentieth century, when conflicts in the center of the continent gave rise to two world wars and the Cold War. In May 1989, George H. W. Bush expressed hope for a Europe "whole and free" in a speech in West Germany that formed the basis for U.S. policy toward the region for the next quarter century.¹⁷ This strategic frame led to a number of U.S. policies in the 1990s including NATO expansion, the effort to build a new relationship with a democratic and market-oriented Russia, and the decisions to end the war in Bosnia and to go to war with Serbia to prevent genocide in Kosovo.¹⁸ Today, although Biden continues to proclaim support for a Europe whole, free, and at peace,¹⁹ such an effort is no longer a meaningful driver of U.S. foreign policy.²⁰ Most of Central and Eastern Europe is now part of NATO and the European Union, and those parts of the former Soviet Union that are left out of these key Western institutions have little prospect of joining anytime soon, if at all. The Biden administration's policies toward Russia and Europe are best understood in the context of the competition with China: keeping things with Russia "stable and predictable"²¹ and getting Europe on board with a common approach toward China on trade and technology.²² After all, if Biden can restore the U.S. relationship with Russia to one of stability and predictability, as he worked to do in his meeting with President Vladimir Putin in Geneva in June 2021, the administration can better keep its focus on China. The president's June 2021 visit to Europe also demonstrated his emphasis on cooperation with

¹⁶ Daniel C. Mattingly, *The Art of Political Control in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Chris Buckley and Keith Bradsher, "China's Communists to Private Business: You Heed Us, We'll Help You," *New York Times*, September 17, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/17/business/china-communist-private-business.html>.

¹⁷ George H.W. Bush, "A Europe Whole and Free," Speech, remarks to Citizens in Mainz, May 31, 1989, <https://usa.usembassy.de/crexts/ga6-890531.htm>.

¹⁸ These elements of a Europe whole and free strategy are developed in more detail in James M. Goldgeier, *Not Whether But When: The U.S. Decision to Enlarge NATO* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1999); James M. Goldgeier and Michael McFaul, *Power and Purpose: U.S. Policy toward Russia After the Cold War* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2003); Derek Chollet and James Goldgeier, *America Between the Wars: From 11/9 to 9/11* (New York: PublicAffairs Books, 2008).

¹⁹ Joe Biden, "My Trip to Europe is about America Rallying the World's Democracies," *The Washington Post*, June 5, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/06/05/joe-biden-europe-trip-agenda/>.

²⁰ James Goldgeier, "Less Whole, Less Free, Less at Peace: Whither America's Strategy for a Post-Cold War Europe?" *War on the Rocks*, February 12, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/02/less-whole-less-free-less-peace-whither-americas-strategy-post-cold-war-europe/>.

²¹ "Holding Russia To Account," U.S. Department of State, issued April 15, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/holding-russia-to-account/>.

²² "Remarks by President Biden at the 2021 Virtual Munich Security Conference," The White House, issued February 19, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/02/19/remarks-by-president-biden-at-the-2021-virtual-munich-security-conference/>.

democratic allies in order to focus on China, such as the suspension of the Boeing-Airbus trade dispute so as to better combat the threat from the Commercial Aircraft Corporation of China, which will soon release a competitor to the Boeing 737 and Airbus A320.²³

To keep the focus on strategic competition with China, the Biden administration will seek to avoid the types of major disasters that can irrevocably damage or even bring down a presidency, like the wars in Vietnam or Iraq. While a similar quagmire is unlikely given the deep experience of the president and his team, they are eager to ensure that a foreign policy crisis does not arise to deflect from the China focus. In Vietnam, President Lyndon B. Johnson did not want to look weak. George W. Bush was led by the ideologues in his administration to pursue the folly of Iraq. Biden is in a strong position to avoid both of those problems.²⁴ Crises born from hubris such as Vietnam and Iraq are less of a pitfall for Biden and his team than those that hobbled the Clinton administration in its first term such as the war in Bosnia (which they wanted to avoid being drawn into but ultimately decided they needed to put an end to), the Somalia intervention (where a mission inherited from the George H.W. Bush administration expanded into the disaster of the Black Hawk Down incident), and the Rwanda genocide (in which, after what occurred in Somalia, Clinton avoided involvement despite the mass killings).

The onset of crises born from neglect and indifference are distinctly possible since President Biden and his advisers have made clear they will not be distracted from keeping their policy focus on China. As with the Syrian civil war during the Obama years, such a crisis, even if it results in humanitarian tragedy, might not have as major an impact on U.S. foreign policy as conflicts like Bosnia and Kosovo in the 1990s given the American public's aversion to getting involved in distant crises. Indeed, Kurt Campbell has made clear that the administration is determined not to shift priorities. In remarks to the Asia Society in July 2021, for example, he stated, "You'll see this movement from the Middle East, and it will be painful, in all likelihood. We'll see some real challenges in places like Afghanistan, but a much greater focus on the Indo-Pacific."²⁵ In the first months of the administration, its initial hands-off responses to crises that emerged in places like Gaza and Haiti demonstrated how determined Biden and his team are not to get sidetracked in their rebalancing of U.S. foreign policy toward the Indo-Pacific.

There could, of course, be a crisis with China. In 1999, the U.S. accidentally bombed the Chinese embassy in Belgrade during the Kosovo War, and in 2001, an American EP-3 reconnaissance plane was forced to land on Hainan Island after colliding with a Chinese fighter. Such a crisis would be far more dangerous today, and a serious U.S.-China clash over Taiwan remains a real possibility.

Conclusion

The Biden administration has geared up for a long-term strategic competition with China, seeking to demonstrate the effectiveness of democracy in providing for the middle-class and building support for American global engagement after the four years of his predecessor. The president sees the country and the world as being at an inflection point, and he is particularly concerned about support for democracy in the United States itself. Biden has absorbed the arguments in Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt's bestseller *How Democracies Die*.²⁶ American democracy survived the 2020 presidential election, thanks in large part to a bipartisan group of state and local officials who were responsible for ensuring a free and fair election throughout the country. As Biden said in July 2021, the election should have been cause for celebration: Americans went to the polls, with record numbers of Democrats and Republicans voting for president, in the midst of a pandemic and without fraud.²⁷ Yet thanks to the loser's inability to graciously accept defeat, Republican officials have repeated the Big Lie that the election was stolen and are working to make it harder for ethnic and racial minority voters to cast their ballots in the next election.

²³ Jennifer Hillman, "Biden's Trade Policy for the Middle Class Takes Shape-And it Begins in Europe," *Council on Foreign Relations*, June 18, 2021, https://www.cfr.org/blog/bidens-trade-policy-middle-class-takes-shape-and-it-begins-europe?utm_medium=social_share&utm_source=tw.

²⁴ Elizabeth Saunders, "No Substitutes for Experience: Presidents, Advisers, and Information in Group Decision Making," *International Organization* (2017), 71(S1): S2018-S247, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/international-organization/article/abs/no-substitute-for-experience-presidents-advisers-and-information-in-group-decision-making/8355A96F3409F13CF4740720EA59BD8D>.

²⁵ Ken Moriyasu, "US Does Not Support Taiwan Independence: Kurt Campbell," *Nikkei Asia*, July 7, 2021, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Biden-s-Asia-policy/US-does-not-support-Taiwan-independence-Kurt-Campbell>.

²⁶ Susan B. Glasser, "American Democracy Isn't Dead Yet, but It's Getting There," *The New Yorker*, May 27, 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/letter-from-bidens-washington/american-democracy-isnt-dead-yet-but-its-getting-there>.

²⁷ Remarks by President Biden on Protecting the Sacred, Constitutional Right to Vote, July 13, 2021. For a discussion of the international election monitoring of the "uneventful" election day, see Susan D. Hyde, "The U.S. Election Is Over. What Did International Observers Think?" The

President Biden's priorities in office in his first year have mainly been domestic ones: getting the population vaccinated, generating broad-based economic growth, and rebuilding America's infrastructure. The administration claimed some important early foreign policy victories to demonstrate that it can deliver for the middle class (such as the agreement with the European Union on the Boeing-Airbus dispute and winning international backing for a global minimum corporate tax). Ultimately, President Biden will be judged less on how the United States fares in the global competition between democracies and autocracies, which will be a long-term endeavor, than on whether his administration can ensure victory for democracy at home at this decisive moment.

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