

## WHITE HOUSE MEMO

*For Biden, Deliberation and Caution, Maybe Overcaution, on the World Stage*

But decisions come more quickly than they did in the Obama administration, when Mr. Biden, as vice president, complained about the endless meetings.



By David E. Sanger

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President Biden, faced with a decision about how to punish Saudi Arabia for its role in the assassination of a Washington Post journalist, gathered his top national security officials in the Oval Office and pushed them at length about their recommended response. Then he sided with a majority of advisers who argued against the most severe action possible — a direct sanction of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who American intelligence agencies say approved the killing.

That same week, Mr. Biden approved relatively modest airstrikes in retaliation against Iranian-backed militias who had attacked an American outpost in Iraq — more of a diplomatic signal than a blow. This week, he matched modest European sanctions on Russia for its poisoning and jailing of Aleksei A. Navalny, the opposition politician, leaving room for what are expected to be harsher moves this month against President Vladimir V. Putin.

And, to avoid being surprised, Mr. Biden is beginning to rein in the military's freedom to use drone strikes outside of war zones.

The Biden foreign policy that emerges from these early weeks is one of restraint, caution and fast-paced deliberation. Decisions come more quickly than they did in the Obama administration, when Mr. Biden, as vice president, complained about the endless meetings.

Early evidence suggests that his judgments come with a harder edge than they did when he was one of many voices in the Situation Room, as indicated by Mr. Biden's decision to cut off the American weapons that allowed the Saudis to prosecute the war in Yemen. It was President Barack Obama who first turned on that weapons spigot.

To Mr. Biden's supporters, it is all a triumph of rationality, of thinking through strategy rather than tweeting a decision first and coming up with the rationale to fit it later. To his critics, including some on the left, Mr. Biden's first few weeks on the world stage are a lost opportunity to penalize a murderous leader, end drone strikes altogether or flip the switch quickly to get back into the Iran nuclear deal.

The president's advisers note that it is early yet, and that some of the hardest decisions are coming in the next few weeks, including whether to withdraw the remaining 2,500 American troops from Afghanistan and what mix of public sanctions and covert cyberstrikes to assemble against Russia for the SolarWinds cyberattack on government and corporate targets.

Afghanistan will pit Mr. Biden's desire to get out against his willingness to risk a Taliban takeover of Kabul, the capital. Responding to Russia in the SolarWinds breach will test his appetite for potential escalation in cyberspace.

But the early indications suggest that Mr. Biden is moving slower on the world stage than he is at home. And that is partly rooted in his belief, his national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, said in an interview, that the United States will regain its global influence only after it has tamed the pandemic, restored economic growth and reset its relationships with allies.

The most telling of his decisions centers on Saudi Arabia. After banning the arms sales to halt what he called a "catastrophic" war in Yemen, Mr. Biden released an intelligence report about Prince Mohammed's role in the killing of Jamal Khashoggi, the dissident journalist, and imposed new penalties on the crown prince's personal royal guard, the so-called Rapid Intervention Force. But Mr. Biden stopped at the next step — barring travel by or threatening criminal prosecution of the 35-year-old crown prince.

The president had not told his staff in advance whether he favored direct action, even though he said in the campaign that the Saudi leadership had "no redeeming social value."

Mr. Sullivan said he and his staff went to Mr. Biden with "a broad-based recommendation that a recalibration of the relationship, rather than a rupture of the relationship, was the right course of action."



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Mr. Biden, Mr. Sullivan said, “pressed us on our assumptions as he worked through the pros and cons of every aspect of the policy,” including the staff’s conclusion that keeping a channel open to the crown prince was the best path to “resolving the war in Yemen.”

But the final decision was a reminder, other aides said, that Mr. Biden emerged from his three decades in the Senate with both a belief in nurturing even the most difficult of alliances — and a dose of realism that the United States could not prevent the crown prince from becoming the next king.

“We deal, unfortunately, every single day with leaders of countries who are responsible for actions we find either objectionable or abhorrent, whether it’s Vladimir Putin, whether it’s Xi Jinping,” Antony J. Blinken, the secretary of state and Mr. Biden’s longest-serving foreign policy adviser, said on Wednesday on “PBS NewsHour.”

“But we find ways to deal with them,” Mr. Blinken said.

Mr. Sullivan asserted that the message to the Saudis was clear: “M.B.S. will not have the same kind of relationship and access with this administration that he had with the last,” using Prince Mohammed’s initials.

But even Mr. Biden’s closest Democratic allies rebelled, saying he was missing a chance to send a resounding message in his opening weeks.

Representative Adam B. Schiff, Democrat of California and the chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, said: “The Biden administration should punish the Saudi crown prince directly. Not only should those who carried out the order be prosecuted, but the person who gave the order.”

Representative Tom Malinowski, Democrat of New Jersey, who served as Mr. Obama’s top human rights diplomat, went further, arguing that the law required the State Department to put travel sanctions on the crown prince — unless it wanted to seek a waiver in Congress, with a public justification.



Mr. Biden sided with a majority of advisers who argued against the most severe action possible — a direct sanction of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman of Saudi Arabia. Bandar Aljaloud/Saudi Royal Palace, via Associated Press

Mr. Biden’s caution was also evident in his retaliation against an Iranian-backed militia group for a rocket attack on an Iraqi base in Erbil, which resulted in casualties but no American deaths. Rather than rush into a response, he took 10 days, aides said, heeding advice from Defense Secretary Lloyd J. Austin III that “you own the clock.”

**Understand the Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan**

**Who are the Taliban?** The Taliban arose in 1994 amid the turmoil that came after the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989. They used brutal public punishments, including floggings, amputations and mass executions, to enforce their rules. Here's more on their origin story and their record as rulers.

The goal was to send a signal to Iran without risking escalation. The Iraqi government was brought into the decision, and the strike was limited to a small cluster of buildings in Syria that was a gathering place for jihadis and smugglers. Even then, Mr. Sullivan and Pentagon officials took one target off the list at the last moment because of images showing there might be women and children present.

Their response may have been overly cautious because another rocket attack followed, on Wednesday, when an American contractor died of a heart attack.

But some leading Democrats still opposed the strike. Senator Tim Kaine of Virginia, who ran for vice president in 2016, said that “the American people deserve to hear the administration’s rationale for these strikes and its legal justification” for acting without first going to Congress. Senator Christopher S. Murphy of Connecticut, who was considered by Mr. Biden for a top foreign policy job, said that there was no existing congressional mandate for Mr. Biden to act. “Congress should hold this administration to the same standard it did prior administrations,” he said.

Mr. Biden’s aides said he was striking back only to protect American troops, and that his goal was to bring an end to the era of constant conflict that started nearly 20 years ago after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks. In the Biden administration’s interim national security strategy, released this week, Mr. Blinken made it clear in a speech describing it: “We will not promote democracy through costly military interventions or attempting to overthrow authoritarian regimes by force,” he said. “We have tried these tactics in the past. However well intentioned, they have not worked.”

Aides cautioned against reading those words as a sign that Mr. Biden was ready to leave Afghanistan by May 1, the deadline in a Trump-era agreement with the Taliban. Mr. Biden has often said that the United States needs some kind of intelligence and quick-reaction force in the region, and that may mean the 2,500 troops stay, for a time.

The harder-to-predict action will be the response to the SolarWinds attack. Mr. Sullivan said there would be “seen and unseen” elements. But the goal, he argued, would be to shape Mr. Putin’s behavior over the long term.

“A set of measures that are understood by the Russians, but may not be visible to the broader world, are actually likely to be the most effective measures in terms of clarifying what the United States believes is in bounds and out-of bounds,” he said.

Eric Schmitt contributed reporting.