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ON POLITICS

Where Biden's Foreign Policy Is Taking the U.S.

The president diverges from both Donald Trump and Barack Obama with a complex vision of coalition-building.

By Giovanni Russonello

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Tom Brenner/Reuters

Soon after taking office, President Biden announced triumphantly that "America is back," saying that he would put internationalism and diplomacy at the heart of his approach to governing — all with the goal of strengthening the United States' standing on the world stage, and reasserting its competitive edge over China.

Nearly six weeks into his term, he has already made a number of foreign policy decisions that give a sense of what that might look like. The picture that's emerging lines up with the tone of his presidential campaign: He's playing things cautious, turning back many of the disruptive policies that his predecessor introduced — but not committing to any major reversal of the United States' long-term investments in the Middle East.

Biden has committed to renewing the New Start nuclear nonproliferation treaty with Russia, and stopped U.S. support for the war in Yemen. But last week he also ordered airstrikes against Iranian-backed fighters in Syria, and has refused to hold the Saudi Arabian royal family's feet to the fire over its role in ordering the killing of Jamal Khashoggi, an American journalist.

Biden ran equally on promises to limit international adventures and to get tough on China. And last month, he ordered Lloyd Austin, the defense secretary, to lead a "global posture review" to assess where the United States might be expending too many military resources abroad, and where more might be needed.

But experts are not expecting a radical ideological departure. "Biden is really focused on the domestic agenda, and as a result wants to minimize any political capital he has to spend on foreign policy issues," said Trita Parsi, a founder of the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft. "Biden never sold himself to be someone who would come in with massively huge ideas and wanted to see a big break with the past."

Biden's Saudi Arabia problem

The Biden administration released an intelligence report last week affirming that Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman of Saudi Arabia had ordered Khashoggi's killing in 2018, but Biden did not directly punish the prince. Covering the news, our Beirut bureau chief, **Ben Hubbard**, wrote that "American strategic interests prevailed" over the ideals of human rights and free speech.

Today, Biden's press secretary, Jen Psaki, defended the administration's decision to impose sanctions on the royal guard unit that carried out the killing but not the royal family itself. She said that a diplomatic strategy would help prevent similar atrocities in the future.

The administration is putting an emphasis on "counterpart-to-counterpart conversations," Psaki said, rather than continuing former President Donald Trump's go-it-alone approach. "That means not holding back and voicing concern and pushing for action as it relates to dissidents or journalists or others being held."

One day before the administration announced its decision on Saudi Arabia, Biden gave the first major indication of his presidency that he would be willing to use military force in the Middle East if he considered it justified. He ordered retaliatory airstrikes against Iranian-backed fighters in Syria,

showing his willingness to maintain a tit-for-tat military presence in the Middle East as Iran continues to support a web of anti-U.S. militias across the region.

In response to the strikes — which reportedly killed at least one fighter in the Kataib Hezbollah militia group, an Iranian-backed group that is also part of the Iraqi government's official security forces — Iran declined a third-party invitation to join the United States in diplomatic negotiations.

On the campaign trail, Biden committed to re-establishing the Iran nuclear deal signed by his former boss, President Barack Obama, and he highlighted his record as an opponent of Obama's intervention in Libya and the troop surge in Afghanistan. (Biden also opposed the risky mission that took out Osama bin Laden, though he has been less quick to brag about that.)

When he arrived in office, one of Biden's first moves was to announce that he would end "all American support for offensive operations in the war in Yemen, including relevant arms sales." It was seen largely as a pre-emptive move, given that Congress was likely to reintroduce a bill that Trump had vetoed cutting off arms sales to support the war in Yemen. But it also reflected pressure from within his party — and from many Republicans supportive of Trump — to turn the page on American intervention.

'Forever wars'

Yet Biden has surrounded himself with veterans of the Democratic foreign-policy establishment in Washington, prompting concerns from some critics in his party that he will return to the kind of moderate-interventionist approach that defined Obama's tenure.

Weeks before his inauguration, a number of progressive groups sent him a list of 100 staff recommendations, as they grew concerned about his picks on foreign policy. Critics have pointed to the prevalence of former Obama administration officials with ties to the weapons industry during their years out of public service.

Biden has said he wants to "end the forever wars," and he often speaks of his experience as the parent of a service member deployed to Iraq (his son Beau, who died of cancer in 2015). But Biden is now seen as highly unlikely to follow through on a campaign promise to remove all U.S. troops from Afghanistan by May 1, in what will be a crucial test of his commitment to nonintervention — in a situation where the results may be ugly either way. This, too, can be explained by his desire to focus on domestic policy, Parsi said, calling it a path-of-least-resistance approach.

"He doesn't seem to want to own what will come afterward — but what will come afterward will come anyway, whether the United States stays or not," Parsi said. "We're going to see an increase in fighting, and horrible violence, in Afghanistan." Owning up to that, though, could extract "a huge amount of political cost," he added.

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.

Coalitions and China

Bonnie Glaser, the director of the China Power Project at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, said that Biden's administration was trying not to let conflicts in the Middle East overshadow his domestic ambitions — or his focus on outcompeting China.

She said that to some degree, the United States' focus on maintaining its influence in the Middle East during the George W. Bush and Obama administrations had prevented it from focusing on strategic brinkmanship with China. "If you're sitting in Beijing, you're probably very happy to see that the U.S. continues to be bogged down in the Middle East," Glaser said. "China benefited greatly the entire decade that the U.S. was distracted with our priorities in the Middle East. They were able to build themselves up as a much stronger country not only economically but also militarily."

She said that when it comes to China, the Biden administration has indicated that it plans to invest in coalition-building to a greater degree than the Trump administration did — and in ways that will inevitably be more complex than under Obama.

"Biden's vision is that we work together with allies in order to compete more effectively with China," Glaser said. "It doesn't mean that there's one coalition that provides one solution to everything. It's not the Cold War, where it's very clear which side each country is on."

Instead, she said, some coalitions will focus on common cause around human rights; others may have more to do with trade considerations; still others will be linked to technology companies and their international reach. "This is going to be more complicated than it was in the Cold War, but we can't expect that we're going to build a coalition that's going to be with us on every issue," she said.

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