

The End of 'America First': How Biden Says He Will Re-engage With the World

Those who have known President-elect Joseph R. Biden Jr. for decades say they expect him to move carefully, providing reassurance with a few big symbolic acts.



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WASHINGTON — President-elect Joseph R. Biden Jr. makes no secret of the speed with which he plans to bury “America First” as a guiding principle of the nation’s foreign policy.

He says he will re-enter the Iran nuclear deal, assuming the Iranians are willing to reverse course and observe its limits.

He would sign up for another five years of the only surviving nuclear arms treaty with Russia and double down on American commitments to NATO after four years of threats from President Trump to withdraw from the alliance, which guided the West through the Cold War.

At the same time, Mr. Biden says he will make Russia “pay a price” for what he says have been disruptions and attempts to influence elections — including his own.

But mostly, Mr. Biden said in a statement to The New York Times, he wants to bring an end to a slogan that came to define a United States that built walls and made working with allies an afterthought — and, in Mr. Biden’s view, undermined any chance of forging a common international approach to fighting a pandemic that has cost more than 1.2 million lives.

“Tragically, the one place Donald Trump has made ‘America First’ is his failed response to the coronavirus: We’re 4 percent of the world’s population, yet have had 20 percent of the deaths,” Mr. Biden said days before the election. “On top of Trump embracing the world’s autocrats and poking his finger in the eye of our democratic allies, that’s another reason respect for American leadership is in free fall.”

But it is far easier to promise to return to the largely internationalist approach of the post-World War II era than it is to execute that shift after four years of global withdrawal and during a pandemic that has reinforced nationalist instincts. The world does not look remotely as it did when Mr. Biden last engaged it from the White House four years ago. Power vacuums have been created, and filled, often by China. Democracies have retreated. The race for a vaccine has created new rivalries.

So while foreign allies may find Mr. Biden reassuring — and smiled when they heard him say in a town-hall meeting that “‘America First’ has made America alone” — they also concede that they may never fully trust that the United States will not lurch back to building walls.

In interviews in the past several weeks, Mr. Biden’s top advisers began to outline a restoration that might be called the Great Undoing, an effort to reverse course on Mr. Trump’s aggressive attempt to withdraw to American borders.

“Whether we like it or not, the world simply does not organize itself,” said Antony J. Blinken, Mr. Biden’s longtime national security adviser. “Until the Trump administration, in Democratic and Republican administrations, the United States did a lot of that organizing, and we made some mistakes along the way, for sure.” Now, however, the United States has discovered what happens “when some other country tries to take our place or, maybe even worse, no one does, and you end up with a vacuum that is filled by bad events.”

Mr. Blinken acknowledged that for those allies — or opponents of Mr. Trump — looking to reset the clock to noon on Jan. 20, 2017, “it’s not going to happen.”

Those who have known Mr. Biden for decades say they expect him to move carefully, providing reassurance with a few big symbolic acts, starting with a return to the Paris climate accord in the first days of his administration. But substantive rebuilding of U.S. power will proceed far more slowly.

“He’ll inherit a situation which both gives him enormous latitude and, oddly, constrains him,” said Richard N. Haass, the president of the Council on Foreign Relations and a longtime friend of Mr. Biden’s. “Clearly, what Trump did by executive order can be undone by executive order.”

But “any act that requires Senate approach or any new use of force, absent a clear provocation, will be pretty much off the table,” he added.

At 77, Mr. Biden has his own back-to-the-future vision of how to dispense with “America First”: “This is the time to tap the strength and audacity that took us to victory in two world wars and brought down the Iron Curtain,” he wrote in Foreign Affairs in March.



President Trump met with leaders of NATO countries in Herfordshire, England, last year. Mr. Biden would like to double down on American commitments to NATO. Al Drago for The New York Times

Yet in a campaign in which foreign policy was rarely mentioned, Mr. Biden was never pressed on how the current iteration of superpower competition differs from what he remembers from early in his political career.

He never stated what kind of “price” he had in mind for President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia to pay, though one of his longtime foreign policy advisers, Jake Sullivan, offered a bit of detail. Just before Election Day, he said that Mr. Biden was willing to impose “substantial and lasting costs on perpetrators of the Russian interference,” which could include financial sanctions, asset freezes, counter cyberattacks and, “potentially, the exposure of corruption by the leaders of foreign countries.”

That would signify a hardening in U.S. policy. But it would also involve steps that the Obama administration considered taking in its last six months, when Mr. Biden was vice president, and never carried out.

The sharp change on Russia offers a glimpse of the detailed planning that Mr. Biden’s transition team, organized late last spring, has engaged in to reverse Mr. Trump’s approach to the world. It has built a foreign policy team of formal and informal advisers, largely drawn from midlevel and senior Obama administration officials who are poised to return. There are timelines for opening negotiations, re-entering treaties and early summit meetings.

But their plans show some notable breaks from the Obama administration’s strategy. Mr. Biden is clearly rethinking positions he took in the Senate and in the White House.

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The most vivid example, officials say, will come in rethinking China strategy. His own advisers concede that in the Obama years, Mr. Biden and his national security team underestimated the speed with which President Xi Jinping of China would crack down on dissent at home and use the combination of its 5G networks and its Belt and Road Initiative to challenge U.S. influence.

“Neither carrots nor sticks have swayed China as predicted,” Kurt Campbell, who served as the assistant secretary of state for Asia, and Ely Ratner, one of Mr. Biden’s deputy national security advisers, wrote in a Foreign Affairs article in 2018 that reflected this shift. “Diplomatic and commercial engagement have not brought political and economic openness. Neither U.S. military power nor regional balancing has stopped Beijing from seeking to displace core components of the U.S.-led system.”

China is just one arena — though probably the most important — where Mr. Biden’s long-held views will come into first contact with new realities.

Afghanistan and the Use of U.S. Force

Robert M. Gates, the defense secretary who served both Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama, described Mr. Biden as “impossible not to like” because he was “funny, profane and humorously self-aware of his motormouth.” But Mr. Gates also famously declared that Mr. Biden “has been wrong on nearly every major foreign policy and national security issue over the past four decades.”



American soldiers at Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan last year. Mr. Biden argued during the early days of the Obama administration for a minimal force focused on a counterterrorism mission in the country. Erin Schaff/The New York Times

That assessment included Mr. Biden’s view on Afghanistan — where he argued, in the early days of the Obama administration in 2009, for a minimal force focused on a counterterrorism mission. Mr. Gates later recalled in his memoir that Mr. Biden was convinced that the military was trying to put the squeeze on the president to send more troops for a war the vice president thought was politically unsustainable.

Mr. Biden was overruled — by Mr. Obama, who nearly doubled the force size in Afghanistan in 2009 before moving to a drawdown.

But what was once a setback for Mr. Biden has now become something of a political asset: Mr. Trump’s effort to cast him as an advocate of “endless wars” fell flat. Mr. Biden, according to Mr. Sullivan, “wants to convert our presence to a counterterrorism capability” aimed at protecting the United States by keeping Qaeda forces or the Islamic State from establishing a base in Afghanistan.

“It would be limited and targeted,” Mr. Sullivan said. “That’s where he was in 2009, and that is where he is today.”

Confronting Russia

In the Cold War, Democrats were often portrayed as the party of appeasement to Moscow. Mr. Biden is the first Democrat to turn the tables: He is neither dismissive of the Russian threat as Mr. Obama was when he debated Mitt Romney, the Republican nominee in 2012, nor is he eager to bring a big red “reset” button to Moscow, as Hillary Clinton did in her opening days as secretary

of state.

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.

In the campaign, Mr. Biden seized on the U.S. intelligence assessment that Russia preferred Mr. Trump, telling reporters in Nevada that “Putin knows me, and I know him, and he doesn’t want me to be president.” He is probably right: After details of the extent of Russian interference in 2016 became clear, followed by Mr. Trump’s unwillingness to confront Mr. Putin, Democrats have become the party of Russia hawks.

For most of the campaign, Mr. Biden assailed Mr. Trump for “cozying up to dictators” and describing how, if elected, he was prepared to punish Russia. As president, Mr. Biden will have to deal with a Russia whose arsenal includes 1,550 deployed nuclear weapons and a raft of tactical nuclear weapons that it has been deploying freely, even before Mr. Trump exited the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty.

How would Mr. Biden end the downward spiral? He would start with a five-year extension of New START, Mr. Blinken said in an interview, since the treaty lapses 16 days after inauguration. Then he would seek to expand the treaty to other types of weapons and perhaps more countries. And he would play on Mr. Putin’s growing economic fragility.

President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia, right, in St. Petersburg this week. Mr. Biden’s sharp change on Russia offers a glimpse of his transition team’s planning to reverse Mr. Trump’s approach to the world. Pool photo by Alexei Nikolsky

“We will deter, and impose costs for, Mr. Putin’s meddling and aggression,” Mr. Blinken said. “But there’s a flip side” to dealing with Moscow, he added. Mr. Putin is “looking to relieve Russia’s growing dependence on China,” Mr. Blinken said, which has left him in “not a very comfortable position.”

That suggests the Biden administration could try to use the suspicions that Moscow and Beijing have of each other to split the two superpowers — just as President Richard M. Nixon used it, in reverse, to win his opening with China nearly 50 years ago.

On Iran, a Resurgent Crisis

“Oh, goddamn,” Mr. Biden fumed in the Situation Room in the summer of 2010, according to participants in the meeting, as news began to leak that a highly classified effort by the United States and Israel to destroy Iran’s nuclear program with a cyberweapon — later called “Stuxnet” — was about to be exposed because the computer code was being replicated around the world. “It’s got to be the Israelis. They went too far.”

A decade later, that effort to undermine the Iranian nuclear effort appears to be the birth of a new age of conflict, one in which Mr. Biden was a key player. He favored the covert effort because he was looking for any way to slow Iran’s progress without risking war in the Middle East. He later told colleagues that he believed the covert program helped bring the country to the negotiating table for what became the Iran nuclear deal five years later.

Now Mr. Biden says the first step with Iran is to restore the status quo — which means re-entering the deal if Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, is willing to return to production limits announced in 2015. But it won’t be that simple. The Iranians have indicated there will be a higher price to pay for Mr. Trump’s breach. And some of the key restrictions on Iran begin to lift soon: The first phase of an arms embargo expired in October, clearing the way for the Russians and the Chinese to begin resuming sales. And there will soon be a new Iranian president, with unknown effects on potential talks.

Mr. Biden’s aides say that returning to the deal that Mr. Trump left “shifts the burden” back on Tehran.

“If Iran decides it’s not going to come back into compliance,” Mr. Blinken said, “we’re in a much stronger position to elicit support from allies and partners” who are now blaming Mr. Trump for starting the crisis by rejecting an agreement the United States had already made.

The China Challenge

In 2012, Mr. Biden was the host when Mr. Xi came to Washington. The vice president praised the guest from Beijing as a rising reformer who was “prepared to show another side of the Chinese leadership.” Mr. Biden was among those to celebrate China’s inevitable but “peaceful rise,” followed by assurance that trying to contain its power was a fool’s errand.

By this year, he had revised his view. “This is a guy who is a thug,” Mr. Biden said.

“This is a guy who is a thug,” Mr. Biden has said about President Xi Jinping of China. Mark Schiefelbein/Associated Press

So during the campaign, he went after Mr. Trump for “fake toughness” and argued that “Trump lost a trade war that he started.” What he meant was that the Trump-era tariffs on Chinese goods were ultimately underwritten by American taxpayers in the form of government subsidies to compensate farmers and others who lost sales.

Mr. Biden has said little about how he would push back. And even if he settles the long-running arguments over agricultural goods and the theft of intellectual property by Beijing, Mr. Biden will face challenges never discussed when Mr. Xi was visiting eight years ago: managing technological inroads by companies like Huawei, the Chinese telecommunications giant, and TikTok, the app that has seized the imaginations and phones of 100 million Americans.

Mr. Biden has suggested that the Trump crackdowns may continue — though surrounded by more skillful diplomacy to bring European and other allies on board.

“God only knows what they’re doing with information they’re picking up off of here,” he said of the Chinese. “So as president, I will go into it very deeply. I’ll get the cyberexperts in with me to give me what is the best solution to deal with it.”

Complicating the issue is Mr. Biden’s insistence that, unlike Mr. Trump, he will put values back at the center of foreign policy, including how to approach the United States’ relationship with China, a milder echo of Bill Clinton’s pledge in the 1992 presidential race to take on “the butchers of Beijing.”

Presumably that means making China pay a price for Mr. Xi’s controls on dissent, including the national security laws that led to detention camps in Xinjiang, arrests of dissidents in Hong Kong and the ouster of foreign journalists who were the last bastion of independent reporting in China.