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NATO and President Biden: what in the world?

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America's friends should welcome the Biden Administration and think hard about how to support it. President Biden and his team will move effectively to repair much that was deliberately broken in US-European relations during the Trump Administration. Biden himself has extraordinary foreign affairs experience, which he will apply in concert with an impressive group of foreign affairs professionals who believe in government, what they are doing, and (problematically) American exceptionalism. He and his Administration have set ambitious goals on a wide range of global and regional issues as well as an unprecedented emphasis on the interpenetration of foreign and domestic policy.

The home front is job number one. Indeed, the greatest risk to the Biden Administration's ambitious double agenda lies precisely at the intersection between competing priority sets. China, in particular, could swallow the Biden Presidency.

President Biden deserves credit for appointing a strong foreign and security policy team, mostly veterans of the Obama Administration. They are capable, intelligent and experienced professionals, a great improvement over their predecessors in the Trump Administration. There is no doubt in my mind that they are well equipped to manage America's engagement with the world. Add to this President Biden himself, who comes to office with rare expertise in international affairs and foreign policy, and we have the most qualified and credentialed foreign and security policy roster since at least the GHW Bush Administration almost 30 years ago.

In their initial moves, President Biden and his team have shown skill that should raise hopes for continued success. They quickly met international expectations by rejoining the Paris Climate Accords and the World Health Organization, and sent reassuring signals to our allies and partners in NATO and elsewhere. The reaffirmation of US commitment to human rights and democracy, as well as a diplomacy-first, military-a-last-resort philosophy were rightly welcomed in America and abroad. When President Biden declared at the State Department that "We're back", it was the right message at the right time to the right audience.

Most importantly, the Biden Administration has stated unequivocally that the US intends to play a leading role in addressing the existential challenges facing humanity: climate change and pandemic disease, to name just the top two. This, combined with a renewed commitment to multilateral approaches and a perhaps unprecedented openness to global solutions on matters like internet

governance open prospects for meaningful cooperation that are a welcome break from the recent and even more distant past.

Earlier this month, the Biden Administration released its "Interim National Security Strategic Guidance", a 24-page foretaste of a longer National Security Strategy likely to be issued sometime in the next year. Release of such Interim Guidance is an unusual step, but it offers some of the best hints so far of what we can expect from the Administration's foreign and security policy.

There is much that is good in the document, but it is not an easy read. The prose is so tightly packed with balancing jargon and virtue notes that it can be hard to discern any real intent. Priorities once stated are then obscured, as everything becomes an imperative. Early on, the Interim Guidance states that priority will be given to the Indo Pacific region, Europe, and the Americas, but the rest of the document belies any such clarity. There is a clear and laudable focus on the integration of domestic affairs and foreign policy.

In the Interim Guidance and other pronouncements, the Biden Administration has highlighted its commitment to restore and strengthen American democracy and to a home-front oriented "build back better" approach on economics, the environment and other policy areas. This at times leads to the enunciation in the Interim Guidance of lofty domestic ambitions that vastly exceed the grasp of the President and Executive Branch. In the Interim Guidance and elsewhere, the Administration's ambitious domestic agenda also veers at times in another, more troubling direction – to justify efforts toward solidifying domestic institutions and promoting justice and equity and other goals as means to a larger end of enhancing American power in the international arena, rather than the other way around. This is not the "foreign policy for the middle class" that Biden seeks, but simply a rehash of mobilizing "all instruments of national power" in pursuit of national objectives, an old notion strangely out of touch with the mood of the country.

The confusion in the Interim Guidance reflects what I see as the confusion in the Biden team's strategic approach. The Administration has trouble describing a level of ambition in foreign and security affairs that fits with its domestic policy priorities. To be fair, this is never an easy task. The Obama Administration wrestled with it for eight years, and in the end never found the sweet spot that satisfied a solid majority of even its own foreign and security policy officials. Internal divisions and public disputes from that era over Syria, Libya, Afghanistan and other matters still reverberate.

Predictably, the reality of serious challenges and tough choices has quickly intruded to demand more clarity in practice from President Biden and his team. Afghanistan, Iran and China all demand urgent attention and could, in short order, determine the success or failure of the President and his foreign policy. There is reason for confidence that the Biden Administration will find a way to navigate the American withdrawal from Afghanistan, but the other two challenges – and particularly China – may prove more vexing.

On Afghanistan, the Trump Administration has left behind a difficult and perhaps unrealistic deadline for final US troop withdrawal in May, but also set in train the basic elements of a sensible policy aimed at ending America's "forever war" and a negotiated political settlement between the Afghan parties. Managing the final stages of this process could well get messy, but the odds are very good that the US will find a way to conclude its military presence in Afghanistan on terms that are at least minimally acceptable to all those involved. I vividly remember the helicopters on the roof of the US embassy in Saigon in 1975, evacuating the last Americans from that country and conflict. That was hardly the "peace with honor" that President Nixon had promised, and I hope not to see it repeated in Kabul, but it also was not a great disaster for the United States. Instead, the great disaster for America and the region was the Vietnam and Indochina War over the preceding 15 years.

Iran is a tougher nut. Here, too, time is short. Early positive signals on a return to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) sent by the Biden Administration have not elicited the expected response from Iran, and exchanges between Washington and Tehran have again become accusatory and acrimonious. The European parties to the JCPOA, and even Russia and China, have picked up some of the diplomatic slack and may yet manage to coax the US and Iran to the table to begin a process of restoring (and possibly improving) the nuclear deal and taking on other contentious issues. This task is rendered more difficult by Tehran's defiant posture and by a political atmosphere in Washington that aims to hold the Biden Administration to a high – indeed seemingly impossible – standard on Iran based on the alleged flaws of the JCPOA. The Administration's impulse to demonstrate toughness in the face of such pressures could thwart its larger strategic effort to disentangle the US from the costly and sometimes misguided engagement in the Middle East that has cost us and the region so dearly over the past 20 years. This in itself would be a serious setback.

China is the most serious challenge of all, and looms large in the Interim Guidance and other policy statements by the new Administration. Here, I see some risk that the new team will rush toward a

needless, costly and ultimately futile "containment" policy. My concerns are not based on personal expertise on China or Asian affairs. I studied Chinese and China studies in graduate school, but that was forty years ago, and my professional career focused on transatlantic relations and Europe. Instead, my concerns are rooted in the experience of the first Cold War and more recent American history, along with vivid memories of how US policy was warped, abused and exploited in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

Without a doubt, China does many things that we don't like, and its rise to parity with the United States in most respects is an uncomfortable process that is fast becoming fact. Under President Xi Jinping, China has become much more assertive and even menacing. Defining just what China is – partner, rival, competitor, enemy? – has become a sort of parlor game. But the outcome of this discussion, undertaken so lightly, could be deadly serious.

The approaches sketched out in the Interim Guidance and elsewhere make sense, relying as they do on strengthening ties with like-minded countries in the Indo Pacific, Europe, and elsewhere in order to address Chinese policies and practices deemed destructive or unfair. This is a good idea, and has been on the table for years. After all, both the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) and the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) were conceived in strategic terms as multilateral responses to challenges presented by China. The opening moves by the Biden Administration have also been promising. Just this month, the initiative by the Quad (U.S., Japan, Australia and India) to support COVID vaccinations in the Indo Pacific region and the joint visit by Secretary of State Blinken and Defense Secretary Austin to Japan, South Korea and Australia fit in this same, sound logic. All eyes are on the first face-to-face meeting between Secretary Blinken and National Security Advisor Sullivan and their Chinese counterparts, to be held in Anchorage, Alaska, later this week.

The US walked out on both TPP and TTIP, wounding the former and killing the latter. This is one reason I doubt our capacity to live up to the goals set out in the Interim Guidance. However, I fear there could also be other, more fundamental problems.

The Biden Administration tries to argue, in the Interim Guidance and elsewhere, that there are no trade-offs between getting tough on China and a "foreign policy for the middle class" – that on the contrary, they are two sides of the same coin. Thus, they pledge no new multilateral trade agreements until powerful steps have been taken domestically to protect and advance the interests of workers, and they insist that trade negotiations, when they come, will include representatives of

labor and environmental groups in a break with the past. This win-win alignment of China hawks and domestic progressives purportedly covers much of the Administration's China agenda.

Only it does not.

The words "containment" and "decoupling" do not appear in the Interim Guidance. No matter how strenuously the Biden Administration argues that it wants to avoid a Cold War with China, however, the measures proposed in the Interim Guidance and elsewhere for addressing the China challenge, taken together, look for all the world like a containment strategy with more than a whiff of expectations for long-term regime change. The language used to frame relations with China – redlines, pushing back, confronting where necessary, decoupling, genocide, cooperating where we must for the sake of humanity – call to mind the first Cold War. By the time I came on the scene, working in East Germany in the late 1980s, such conceptions had ceded some ground, at least, to the logic of détente. Leaving aside President Reagan's "evil empire" bluster, the language we used then about the Soviet Union was more engaging and less redolent of fear than the language we are using now about China. Furthermore, many voices couch the US-China rivalry in ideological terms, pitting US and Western defense of democracy and free markets against China's allegedly expansionist program of authoritarian communism and predatory investment. At the same time, President Xi Jinping – hardly a sympathetic figure in any case – is demonized, and the very notion of peaceful coexistence with China and the Chinese Communist Party is contested. "Making the world safe for democracy" by thwarting China hangs in the air.

Meanwhile, being "tough on China" enjoys almost universal political support in Washington, as prominent Democratic and Republican figures profile themselves as "China hawks." There is little to no room for more moderate voices and more nuanced approaches. On the contrary. Senate Majority Leader Schumer is reportedly considering major China-focused legislation as a means of helping to unify Congress and wrong-foot the GOP. While such legislation might well include sensible measures such as onshoring critical supply chains, the populist anti-China logic is inescapable – in fact, front and center. Left unanswered – what is the real cost of decoupling, and is it even realistic? Which supply chains are critical? How does it help American workers if items once sourced from China are now sourced from Vietnam? Before we embark on a new Cold War, let us ask ourselves which was more characteristic of the first one: the Apollo landing on the moon in 1969 or the evacuation of Americans from the Saigon embassy roof six years later?

Forgive me if, having grown up and worked in the Cold War, I now have a sense of déjà vu all over again. There should at least be a vigorous policy debate before we embark on a long, costly and quite possibly unnecessary struggle to contain and change China. "Containment" sounds deceptively benign, modest and risk-averse; of course, it is none of those things. In the 20th Century, containment was the rationale for Vietnam, Cambodia, and other wars, and brought the world to the brink of nuclear devastation during the Cuban Missile Crisis. As so often, the readiness to drown out dissenting voices and concerns to embrace a hard line arises in part from a misunderstanding of the past – in this case, the first Cold War – as well as the nuances of the present. But that is a topic too large to address here. Suffice it to say that the prevailing disregard for, and even hostility to, alternative, less confrontational approaches to China is eerily reminiscent of the mood in Washington during the 1950s, 1960s and 2000s.

Underpinning all of the discussion on Iran and, even more so, China is the expectation that numerous "like-minded countries" are thirsty (after eight or twelve years, depending on one's assessment of the Obama Administration) for American "leadership" in confronting our "common adversaries". Australia is seen as a model in this regard, and the other leading democracies of the Indo Pacific – Japan, South Korea, and perhaps even India – are seen as potentially compliant. This is the framework in which the Quad has been given new prominence and new purpose. That Taiwan features in this discussion is particularly problematic and provocative.

China's recent behavior has indeed alienated its regional neighbors and alarmed much of the world. But evidently not enough for Washington. Countries in the region, including in the Quad, are more cautious than the US. Meanwhile, complaints are loud here that Europeans "don't get it" regarding China or refuse to put alleged strategic sense above narrow material interest. As so often, there is an element of truth to these complaints; Europeans have at times been slow to recognize the ways that China and others exploit the weaknesses of our systems, and it is undeniably difficult to craft an effective common position in the European Union on some key issues. There has, however, been a good deal of movement toward US views on a range of matters; who would have thought five years ago that strategic dialogue on China would be on the agenda of the North Atlantic Council? Still, the expectation persists that Europeans should simply fall in line behind the US on China, reminiscent of GW Bush's "either with us or against us" line on Iraq and the Global War on Terrorism.

American policy makers expect, not unreasonably, that others will take US concerns about China more seriously. At the same time, it is incumbent on the US, as well, to take the views of others

more seriously, but Washington has not always found this notion compatible with American "leadership." To my mind, the more that US China policy takes the form, even tacitly, of containment and a new Cold War, the more strain it will put on transatlantic relations, and the less likely it will be that Europe will follow America's "lead."

As this piece is written for a NATO-oriented publication and the audience is presumably mostly Europeans and North Americans, it has perhaps been noticed that I have said very little about transatlantic relations per se. This is because I believe US-Europe relations, including in NATO, are on a sound footing and moving in the right direction, and the Biden Administration team is very well qualified to manage these relations productively. The picture is not entirely rosy, of course. Problems abound. Yet despite the corrosive effect of the Trump Presidency on public opinion and on the critical political cohesion of the Alliance, NATO is healthy and reinvigorated, with a long and realistic "to-do list". A more balanced strategic dialogue between the US and its Allies is taking shape, and the notion is taking hold that Europe and European states must do more to defend themselves and address security challenges in adjacent regions. The Biden team has made all the right moves so far, in my view, from cancelling the withdrawal of US forces from Germany to reaffirming the centrality of Article 5 of the Washington Treaty.

Personally, I would like to see more strenuous efforts to find areas for cooperation with Moscow while holding the line on Ukraine and other Russian outrages. The Biden team appears inclined to gamble heavily on Ukraine's orientation toward the West and back it up with risky commitments that are hard to justify. Still, the transatlantic consensus on dealing with the Putin regime seems to be holding, and that is a good thing. As for Turkey, nothing seems to work, so the US and Europe have little choice but to uphold our principles while trying to avoid a more severe rupture and exploring possibilities, however tentative, for more productive cooperation. Finally, I think closer EU integration, including in the defense and security realm, would be a very good thing for Europe, the United States and the world, but that has been on my wish list for a long time.

Ironically, Europe may share in some degree a common fate with China in the context of US foreign policy over the coming years. Certainly, for many Americans, European "loyalty" or "perfidy" vis-à-vis China will be a litmus test for the usefulness of our alliance, however unfair that might seem. More basically, however, the US has not made up its mind on two fundamental choices.

First, can we accept a genuinely multipolar world in which China and, to a degree, Europe are competing poles of influence and power? Much of the Biden Administration's talk about leadership suggests that we cannot. The depiction of great power competition in the Interim Guidance and elsewhere is, perhaps, a combative description of a multipolar world, but not one that leaves much room for independent, divergent but otherwise constructive engagement by other parties. US intentions on this score should become clearer in the enhanced strategic dialogue in NATO as well as in other multilateral fora such as the G7 and the Quad. Lest strong transatlanticists contend that a multi-polar world is not in Europe's interest, I would simply say that the emerging alternative does not look benign: a bipolar US-China world in which Europe is expected to fall in line behind the United States to decouple from China, contain China and thwart China's ambitions.

Second, is the US – indeed, is this Administration – genuinely determined to set a level of ambition in foreign and security policy that will permit it to focus on the home front and "build back better"? Here, realistic goals and clear priorities are needed, and it is hard to see them at present. As mentioned earlier, the Administration asserts that there is no "guns vs. butter" trade-off in dealing with China; an approach that favors confrontation over cooperation is good for workers and geostrategy mavens alike. Again and again, President Biden and his senior officials describe engaging competitors like Iran and China from a "position of strength". This could be nothing more than empty jargon. It might reflect a healthy view that America needs to get its domestic house in order as a prerequisite for engaging more effectively in international competition, but such sequencing is virtually impossible in the real world. It is probably tied to the need to build coalitions and work with others, a positive impulse. Unfortunately, operating from a "position of strength" also appears, at least in the short term, to be a rationale for tough talk and tit-for-tat retaliation which is aimed, if anywhere, at bolstering deterrence. We have been down that barren path many times before.

It is reasonable – even natural – that the US should try to alter Iran's and China's behavior in ways that better align with the interests of America and its allies and partners. This effort need not lead to war in the Persian Gulf or a new Cold War with China. There is reason to be on guard against this, however, and not only because of Beijing's assertiveness and Tehran's misdeeds. Washington needs to resist the temptation to follow the interventionist impulses of much of the foreign policy establishment, whether neocons or liberal internationalists. This establishment – the notorious "Blob" – is very much present in the Biden Administration and part of the current "group think" rush to confrontation and containment.

There are good ideas for how to design a foreign policy with a more modest and realistic level of ambition. I am a fan of Harvard Prof. Stephen Walt and his concept of "offshore balancing." Such an active but more modest role would reflect the desires of the American people after 20 years of "forever wars". American foreign policy in the 21st Century has been a litany of failure leavened by episodes of success. Polls show that Americans support US "engagement" in the world much more than US "leadership." As capable and credentialed as they are, the team that President Biden has assembled to develop and lead his foreign and security policy is quite conventional, focused on American "leadership" and the purportedly "indispensable" role of the US in all places and at all times. Indeed, their professional pedigrees in the lackluster policies of the past two decades may impede creative strategic thinking for a changed world.

Learning from past mistakes is sadly a rare human trait. Joe Biden himself, however, seems to model it in many respects. Just as President Trump's personal role was a catalyst for chaos, President Biden's personal role could be absolutely central to renewal and success.

So, I would add a third fundamental choice that America confronts as the Biden Administration gets underway: Is the US – is this Administration -- open to new ideas in foreign and security policy? President Biden – the oldest US President ever to assume office – may hold the answer, but only time will tell.


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