



Trump and Biden Are Both Touting Foreign-Policy Failures as Achievements

With the world on fire from Thailand to Nigeria, there wasn't much talk of international affairs in the final debate of the 2020 campaign—and when there was, both candidates defended flawed approaches to North Korea.

Emma Ashford and Matthew Kroenig

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Matthew Kroenig: Well, we are just over one week away from the big day. And the candidates had their last opportunity to reach a large, nationwide audience in last night's debate. Were you able to watch it? What did you think?

Emma Ashford: Well, it wasn't the best debate ever, but unlike the last one, it was at least watchable.

MK: [SILENCE].

EA: Hang on, my two minutes weren't up. I think you're still on mute.

It was definitely a better debate, but I thought it was pretty laughable that this was described as the "foreign policy" debate. It was only about 15 minutes of foreign policy, most of which was arguing about which candidate's family took money from overseas. Quite depressing.

MK: OK. Can I talk now?

EA: Please.

MK: Thank you, moderator. This debate was a big improvement over the first one, but foreign-policy wonks were disappointed. It was light on foreign policy. And the cross-accusations about family corruption from international business dealings were not a shining moment for the United States. It makes me wonder whether some kind of reforms are necessary to prevent politicians' families from profiting from their office.

EA: I share your concerns about corruption and elected officials; any normal person would be denied a security clearance if they had some of these financial or family liabilities! But I'm not sure I have a solution; after all, the American people elected them. They have the public trust, even if after the Trump administration, I'm not sure the public is such a good judge of character.

And so here we are in 2020: Hunter Biden might be a bit sketchy, but reforms to prevent corruption would probably put the whole Trump clan out on the street.

MK: Normal people also find it outrageous. My friends and family in Missouri can't believe that a politician's son earned more money in a month than they do in a year, in a field in which he

had zero experience, because of his last name. It fuels the anti-establishment and populist sentiment that we have seen in the past few years.

The candidates were able to cover several issues if only briefly, including: China, Russia, North Korea, climate change, and COVID-19. Did you find their arguments on these issues compelling?

EA: Not particularly. You?

MK: I did find it strange that they boasted about their North Korea achievements. From Bill Clinton to Donald Trump, Washington has tried everything, yet North Korea's nuclear and missile arsenal continues to grow. I would have steered toward areas where there are more signs of success.

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The Obama administration failed to prevent North Korea from growing its arsenal, and the Trump administration has actually allowed it to progress to intercontinental ballistic missiles that could threaten U.S. cities. Not to be hyperbolic, but in terms of actual threat to the U.S. homeland, that places North Korea behind only Russia and China!

And neither candidate on stage has a good solution. Trump just talked about his love affair with Kim Jong Un, ignoring the fact that Kim just unveiled yet another new missile. What will he do with another four years? More flattery from Pyongyang while letting Kim do whatever he wants, regardless of U.S. interests? And Joe Biden is barely better. He said last night that he wouldn't meet with Kim unless Kim agreed to denuclearize. That's entirely unrealistic and would preclude talks that could actually mitigate some of the risks involved.

MK: I agree, it is serious. North Korea is only the third U.S. adversary capable of nuking the U.S. homeland. There is only one realistic path forward regardless of who wins: keep up the sanctions pressure and hold out the hope of diplomacy, even as Washington deters and defends against the nuclear and missile threats that continue to grow.

EA: For me, the theme across many of the foreign-policy questions was that neither candidate is great. I generally think Biden would be better on foreign policy, but his answers last night were a reminder of how often he's supported a failed Washington consensus on foreign policy.

MK: There have been failures, like North Korea, but the Washington consensus on foreign policy over the past 75 years has been a stunning success. But that debate would require its own column if not a book.

EA: Well, how about this: What was missing from the debate on foreign policy was almost as interesting as what was included. No questions about Afghanistan or the Middle East, despite the fact that the country is still fighting multiple wars in those places. No questions about the defense budget and whether it should be cut or increased. No real questions about trade.

There was certainly a lot of China. If I only watched this debate and didn't know much else about foreign policy, I'd probably believe that China is responsible for everything bad in the world.

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MK: Given the challenge Washington faces from Beijing, "China = bad" is not a terrible message to get across to the American people. Maybe one day we will finally be able to ban TikTok. And populations around the world are starting to understand. Public opinion on China is declining globally, with 81 percent of Australians, for example, now viewing the country unfavorably.

EA: Perhaps, but the tone of the debate on China wasn't really helpful. Trump spent most of his time blaming China for the coronavirus, and Biden spent his time trying to portray Trump as cozy with Xi Jinping.

Biden did manage to give a broad overview of his China policy, but I was struck by the extent to which it sounded just the same as Trump's China policy, but with more international cooperation. For example, he highlighted the Obama administration's choice to fly bombers in contested airspace near China to push back on Chinese territorial claims.

The two parties seem to be aligning on China, which I find worrying. I guess you don't?

MK: Yes. Biden's arguments on several items, including China and to some degree COVID-19, seemed to be "I will do the same things, but without the drama."

I welcome the growing bipartisan consensus on China. This is a generational challenge, and in order for U.S. strategy to be sustainable it will need bipartisan support.

Trump also had his best line yet on Russia, saying he provided Ukraine with "tank-busters" to fight Moscow when Biden was only willing to send "pillows and sheets." He is right about that. Critics have been so focused on Trump's alleged collusion with Russia that they have overlooked a defense policy that has been tougher on Russia than any U.S. president since Ronald Reagan.

You know, there were events in the world last week other than last night's debate stage. Have you been following developments in Thailand?

EA: I have! I spent quite a lot of time in Bangkok when I was younger, and I've been frankly amazed to see the changes over the last few years. There's always been internal political divisions in Thailand, and protests are nothing new. But it used to be the case—under the old king's rule—that the royal family was seen as above politics and revered by many. Even without the draconian *lèse-majesté* laws, few Thais would have criticized the king. The father was one of the longest-ruling monarchs in history, and he was widely loved by his citizens, to the extent that the monarchy was basically unquestioned by major protests and a coup in the mid-2000s.

But his son is very different. He's widely viewed as corrupt, he's on his fourth wife, plus an official concubine, and he has taken an increasingly dictatorial approach to politics. In just a few short years as king, he's managed to drag the royal family into politics, and he's brought Thailand to a place where there are now pro-democracy protesters who openly oppose the king's policies. That would have been unheard of a decade ago.

MK: My knowledge of Thailand is mostly limited to the comparative strength of chicken satay offerings at D.C.-area restaurants. But I do have some thoughts about the implications for U.S. foreign policy. Thailand is a formal U.S. treaty ally—a legacy of the Cold War Southeast Asia Treaty Organization, the anti-communist Cold War alliance in Southeast Asia. And Southeast Asia will be an important region for competition with China, with Thailand’s ruling military junta moving closer to Beijing in recent years. Washington has advocated for democracy in the country, and I hope that it is able to maintain, or even strengthen, its relations with Bangkok after the dust settles.

EA: It’s a difficult spot for the U.S. government to be in—wanting Thailand to stay stable, but the government appears determined to push toward autocracy. This is the place where a coherent administration could have a quiet word with the government about its response to protests, putting the U.S. finger on the scale. Still, as we saw during the Obama administration and the Arab Spring, it doesn’t always work.

What about Nigeria? The protests in Lagos are now so big that they’ve effectively shut down the largest city in Africa.

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Nigerians have been protesting against SARS, a special Nigerian police unit.

EA: To be clear: SARS in this case is a police unit, not a coronavirus disease?

MK: That was my first thought when I saw the news as well. But it stands for the Special Anti-Robbery Squad, and its “special anti-robbery” techniques apparently include murder, rape, and torture. After nearly two weeks of nightly protests, the Nigerian police opened fire, reportedly killing dozens of innocent protesters. The government claims that SARS will be merged into a new unit, but people are skeptical that anything will really change.

EA: It’s an interesting reminder that outside the United States—where such issues are often viewed mostly through the prism of race—there are still questions about policing and violence, even in a country like Nigeria where both the victims and perpetrators are Black. Elsewhere, age and socioeconomic status play a much bigger role, or at least a bigger role than we usually acknowledge in the United States.

In Nigeria these protests are being driven by young people; Nigeria has an average age of 18, with a huge youth bulge. That’s a trend that’s replicated all over Africa and the Middle East, and it has the potential to create unrest in the future, particularly if governments can’t create an environment that offers opportunities for these young people.

MK: Africa has never been a priority region for U.S. foreign policy, but Nigeria is important in its own right. It is the most populous country in Africa and a major oil producer.

EA: It’s not just a major oil producer, it’s one of the top oil-producing states in the world. And like a lot of petrostates, that oil production has been detrimental to Nigeria’s ability to develop economic opportunities, and to the conduct of good government.

Unfortunately, U.S. foreign policy continues to see Nigeria—and the states around it—primarily through the lens of counterterrorism. The U.S. military presence in Africa has grown

substantially in recent years, and it's all focused on militant groups like Boko Haram. But as these protests show, Africa is a vibrant, developing region, with a growing youth population and the potential for trade and diplomatic engagement. Viewing it just through the prism of terrorism is a huge mistake.

MK: Foggy Bottom is paying attention to another African country this week. Washington took Sudan off the state sponsors of terrorism list, and on Friday the White House announced it will become the latest majority-Muslim nation to normalize relations with Israel, following the example set by United Arab Emirates and Bahrain.

EA: I'm going to try to put this as delicately as possible: It sometimes seems that the Trump White House is more concerned with Israeli foreign policy than with U.S. foreign policy.

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And I don't mean that in the conspiracy theory sense, or the absurd anti-Semitic arguments about Israel and U.S. foreign policy. What I mean is simply that this Sudan decision is the latest in a line of decisions—from Jared Kushner's Middle East peace plan to the Serbia-Kosovo deal (which hinged on Serbia moving its embassy to Jerusalem)—that the Trump administration has made that seem far more concerned with whether Benjamin Netanyahu is happy than with whether it's good for U.S. foreign policy.

To be clear, the state sponsor of terrorism list is a bit of a joke. States only get placed on it if the United States doesn't like them, and they never get placed on it—no matter how many proxy groups they fund—if they're a U.S. partner like Saudi Arabia or Pakistan. But it would have been nice to see that designation for Sudan used as a bargaining chip for something that was in U.S. interests, rather than just another attempt to force states to be nicer to Israel.

But we're running out of time here. Let's finish with a lightning round. What do you think of the New START treaty extension?

MK: Well, I think Middle East peace is not just good for Israel, but for Washington, and much of the rest of the world.

On New START, like with Sudan, the Trump administration is seeking another preelection diplomatic win. The reported deal would extend New START for one year in exchange for a freeze on all nuclear warheads. It is better than the alternatives. No one wants to see arms control collapse altogether, but a clean five-year extension is not in the U.S. interest either. Russia is building a new generation of nonstrategic and exotic nuclear systems not covered by New START, so the proposed way forward would freeze those systems and give Washington one year to try to negotiate a more sweeping agreement.

I'm not sure that was brief enough for a lightning round. Can you do better on Brexit?

EA: It's a mess. Even in January, when the results of the U.S. election—and possibly the Trump presidency—have come and gone, Brexit will still be a mess. Boris Johnson's government is fumbling badly, and a no-deal Brexit is back to being likely. I'm more concerned about the potential impact on the union. Sentiment for independence is growing where I'm from in Scotland, and there's a strong sentiment that the Scottish government has handled COVID-19 far

better than Westminster. I'm not alone among British expats in fearing that Brexit could push renewed independence sentiment, and it's looking like that fear is well founded.

Still not brief enough. Bolivia?

MK: Bolivia just elected a socialist president in the mold of Evo Morales. Bad news for that country's economy and for U.S. interests in Latin America.

Guinea?

EA: Deadly clashes after a contested election, and while election observers say that it was fairly conducted, the 82-year-old president is probably not actually allowed to rule for this third term under the constitution. It's a mess.

Look, it's hard to boil complex foreign-policy decisions down to one-liners for debate. But I still think we did a better job than Donald Trump and Joe Biden. After all, we actually talked about foreign policy in our foreign-policy debate.

MK: I agree. But I better go. The delivery guy from Mai Thai just rang the doorbell.