President Joe Biden Speaks on Foreign Policy: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

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President Joe Biden dropped by the State Department yesterday to praise the State Department and promote his views. The president offered a little bit of everything, a complex mix of the good, the bad, and the ugly.

Good was the return of essential decency to American policy. Biden does not hate immigrants, despise visitors, and fear refugees. To the contrary, he demonstrated compassion and openness absent from the White House over the last four years, revoking the so-called Muslim travel ban and expanding the admission of refugees.

He explained: "We also face a crisis of more than 80 million displaced people suffering all around the world. The United States' moral leadership on refugee issues was a point of bipartisan consensus for so many decades when I first got here. We shined the light of lamp on liberty, of oppressed people [stet]. We offered safe havens for those fleeing violence or persecution." (Of course, it was America's wars which displaced many of them.)

Good was Biden's commitment to a variety of important values. He advocated "diplomacy rooted in America's most cherished democratic values, defending freedom, championing opportunity, upholding universal rights, respecting the rule of law and treating every person with dignity." It is important to again have American leaders who believe in such verities, in contrast to the uninterested and unthinking Donald Trump and the squalid, cynical, and sanctimonious Mike Pompeo.

Still, the praise must be hedged, since the values that Biden espouses have been used to justify some of the most monstrous atrocities and terrible conflicts: Philippine-American War, World War I, Iraq War, and others. The doctrine of humanitarian intervention is dangerous, often misused as a justification for perpetual conflict, militarized social engineering, and sanctimonious vengeance. The top foreign policy professionals surrounding Biden backed *all the endless wars of the 2000s*.

Equally good was the end of the Trump administration's permanent kowtow to the Saudi royals. Biden obviously is not impressed by the murderous, corrupt, and authoritarian crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman, or the aggressive war that he launched against Yemen. Biden announced that the war on Yemen, in which the people "are suffering an unendurable

devastation," must end. Thus, "we're ending all American support for offensive operations in the war in Yemen, including relevant arms sales."

However, whether the president really considers "offensive" to be what the rest of us would define as offensive is unclear. Alas, the bipartisan Washington war party can never be trusted, even with simple definitions. In 2011 the Obama administration, in which Biden served, decided that the war in Libya, in which the U.S supported the rebels by bombing Muammar Khadafy's forces, did not count as a war. Moreover, the Saudis are likely to continue their six-year killing spree even without US backing. Nevertheless, Biden is at least likely to eliminate US support for attacks on Yemeni civilians, so Americans will no longer be accomplices to war crimes.

Also good was the restoration of daily press briefings at State, as well as the White House and Pentagon. Of course, such encounters often are short on useful information and long on propagandistic tripe. Still, democratic government has greater accountability if officials subject themselves to questioning. Now, we must hope that the press will abandon its recent shameless cheerleading for everything Biden and longer unthinking regurgitation of official misstatements and lies on behalf of endless war.

Unfortunately, however, Biden's talk also included plenty of bad. For instance, Biden promoted the illusion that America can do something effective about Burma, in which the military unseated the semi-democratic government. "We are united in our resolve," he intoned, followed by many "shoulds" – the military should yield power, reinstate the civilian authorities, etc. Yes, and Santa Claus *should* make a return visit to comfort Burma's children.

While criticizing the coup Washington *should* acknowledge its limited options. The Tatmadaw, Burma's military, ruled directly and brutally for 49 years, for all that time isolated and much of it sanctioned. China will cheerfully help fill the economic gap that results. Rather than demanding to lead, the US should back the efforts other democratic states as they seek to find a path that better promotes Burma's citizens without expanding Beijing's influence.

The president promised that "Defense Secretary Austin will be leading a global posture review of our forces so that our military footprint is appropriately aligned with our foreign policy and national security priorities." That should be good news, since America is overcommitted and defending a gaggle of dubious partners capable of caring for themselves.

However, the result is more likely to be bad, an increase rather than decrease of America's military responsibilities. For instance, after announcing the global posture review Biden declared that he was halting the withdrawal of troops from Germany, which prefers to let Washington defend Europe's wealthiest and most populous nation. Moreover, the president *did not once mention Afghanistan*, which only heightens suspicions that he plans to break the agreement with the Taliban and maintain US forces in that country indefinitely, meaning permanently.

Bad too was Biden's overreliance on alliances. He claimed: "American alliances are our greatest asset, and leading with diplomacy means standing shoulder to shoulder with our allies and key partners once again." The president appears to believe that defense organizations are an end, not a means. Which is a very dangerous misconception.

When the US was working with other nations to defeat Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan, alliances were an asset for America. However, when Washington does most of the work defending the Europeans against a much weaker Russia, the alliance is a scam. Adding new

members such as <u>Montenegro and North Macedonia</u> to NATO multiplies Washington's responsibilities while returning nothing of value. Even worse would be <u>including Ukraine</u> <u>and Georgia</u>, which, currently involved in conflicts with nuclear-armed Russia, would vastly increase the risks facing America for nothing.

Then there is the ugly. Biden has a strange fixation on Russia. Vladimir Putin is a bad guy, but America's dictator friends in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates are worse, as well as the leaders of Central Asia States with which the US is friendly. Biden included a riff about how "the politically motivated jailing of Alexis Navalny and the Russian efforts to suppress freedom of expression and peaceful assembly are a matter of deep concern to us," yet dismissed <u>China's far more brutal assault on liberty</u> with a throwaway line about "China's attack on human rights."

Moreover, Biden complained about "Russia's aggressive actions, interfering with our election, cyber attacks, poisoning its citizens." Yes, Moscow has behaved badly. But he ignored <u>America's return delinquency</u> – interfering in Russia's elections, expanding NATO to Russia's borders, providing weapons to Moscow's enemies, promoting revolutions against Russia's friends. Indeed, nothing done by Vladimir Putin compares to George W. Bush's crime of invading Iraq, which killed and displaced far more people, caused far more destruction, and ruined more countries.

Also ugly was Biden's unwarranted concern for <u>Saudi Arabia's defense</u>: "We're going to continue to support and help Saudi Arabia defend its sovereignty and its territorial integrity and its people." However, the spoiled royals don't need America for that. The Kingdom should just end its disruptive and destabilizing attacks on its neighbors, such as Yemen, which shocked the Saudis by fighting back. Anyway, the tens of billions of dollars' worth of warplanes, other weapons, and munitions sold by the US were supposed to enable Riyadh to protect itself. If the Saudi people have no interest in dying for their exploitative royals, why should Americans do so?

Finally, Biden advocated "a foreign policy for the middle class," a hobby horse of National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan. Unfortunately, the president mistakenly believes that protectionism is good for Americans and pushed the discredited nostrum of "buy American." In any case, the best "foreign policy for the middle class" would be a restrained "humble" foreign policy of the sort which George W. Bush advocated before 9/11. That is, a foreign policy which protects American interests, restricts war to a last resort to defend vital interests, and emphasizes the role of private individuals as the country's best ambassadors. Indeed, Americans acting as humanitarians, traders, missionaries, students, athletes, musicians, tourists, journalists, adventurers, and more demonstrate what is best about the US and do the most to transform the world.

"America is back," exulted Biden. However, America never left. Donald Trump was maladroit, insufferable, and inarticulate, but understood an essential truth: the US is overextended and overburdened. To reestablish a foreign policy that expects a bankrupt republic to again police the globe, provide defense welfare to wealthy allies, and remake failed societies will inevitably plant the seeds of its own destruction.

With his emphasis on meeting domestic needs, Biden has an opportunity to learn from his predecessor's failure. Washington should put Americans first while respecting the interests of others. The US needs a foreign policy which is simultaneously realistic and moral.

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