



Biden Sees the A-Team. I See the Blob.

There's plenty of reason to be skeptical of the president-elect's national-security choices—but here's hoping he proves history wrong.

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Back in early 2001, I attended a dinner of foreign-policy mavens with a friend who was about to join the incoming Bush administration. His confidence in his future colleagues and his expectations for the future were sky-high. He saw the Clinton administration as a bunch of well-meaning but naive amateurs who had repeatedly mishandled major foreign policy issues, and he told well-wishers at this gathering that they could relax, sit back, and watch how smoothly things would run now that a team of experienced professionals—Colin Powell, Donald Rumsfeld, Condoleezza Rice, Dick Cheney, etc.—were back in charge.

We all know how that turned out, alas, but I've been reminded of this episode as I've watched reactions to the roll-out of President-elect Joe Biden's foreign policy team. For some observers, the new team is manna from heaven; just what the country needs after the incoherent, tweet-driven, and mostly ineffective chaos of the Trump/Pompeo era. Former *Foreign Policy* editor David Rothkopf sees Biden's initial appointees as an "all-star list," and believes "they're picking the A-team." Former top officials have hailed Secretary of State nominee Antony Blinken as someone with "unique insight into the full range of national security issues" and praised Biden's nominee as Director of National Intelligence, Avril Haines, as a "wonderful choice" and "whip-smart."

The new team has won measured praise from experts who rarely, if ever, agree, such as the Quincy Institute's Trita Parsi and Mark Wallace, CEO of United Against Nuclear Iran, with the latter describing Biden's initial picks as "talented, thoughtful, and reasonable." Other supporters see them as an experienced, professional group that has worked together in the past, enjoys the president-elect's full confidence, and is ready to repair relations with traditional U.S. partners.

At the same time, however, progressives and advocates of foreign-policy restraint have voiced greater misgivings. Robert Wright and Connor Echols gave Blinken an overall grade of C- on their "progressive realist" report card, and others pointed out that Biden and almost all of his top picks had openly supported the 2003 war in Iraq. Doug Bandow of the Cato Institute went further, warning that Biden's early appointments signaled that the "The Blob was Back and Ready for War." From the right, Republican Reps. Marco Rubio and Tom Cotton, and lame-

duck Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, have started denouncing Team Biden even before its members have been sworn in, no doubt in order to enhance their own presidential chances four years from now.

Who's right? In truth, none of the pundits who are busily opining about foreign policy under a Biden administration—including yours truly—know exactly what they will do or how well they will do it. Past attitudes and choices are suggestive but not dispositive: The question is not what they did in the past but rather what they do next year and beyond. And despite my own misgivings about the new administration (about which more below), they should be judged not on their past errors but on their future performance.

As former British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan famously quipped, what blows governments off-course are “events, dear boy, events.” No administration anticipates every problem it will have to address, and the unexpected often overwhelms whatever well-laid plans one might have had on one’s first day in office. Former President George W. Bush ran for office in 2000 opposing nation-building and promising a “humble” foreign policy, but he got blindsided by the September 11 attacks and it blew his entire foreign policy off-course. Former Barack Obama didn’t see the Arab Spring coming, but it eventually consumed lots of time, energy, money, lives, and political capital, and brought no credit to his handling of foreign affairs. Outgoing President Donald Trump never expected to face a global pandemic, and his inept response to it helped make him a one-term president. No matter what Team Biden thinks it will do in foreign policy, success is likely to depend not on what they plan but on how they handle the things they didn’t expect.

That said, there are some obvious reasons to worry about the new administration’s proclivities. Both Biden and his closest advisors remain committed to an image of U.S. global leadership, that was never as successful as they believe and is badly outdated today. It is a vision that assumes the United States can still exert the same level of global influence it did when it constituted upwards of 30 percent of the world economy and it enjoyed a well-deserved reputation for administrative competence and diplomatic prowess. Although Biden et al may recognize that the unipolar era is over and that the United States cannot solve every global problem on its own, their own statements suggest that they would still like to try.

Consider Biden’s March 2020 essay in *Foreign Affairs*. The title, “Why America Must Lead Again,” is itself revealing, as is Biden’s confident assertion that his foreign policy “will place the United States back at the head of the table.” Not just *at* the table, mind you, but at *the head*. That instinct is a recipe for overcommitment: If the United States insists on leading on every important issue, it will provoke immediate resistance from some countries (e.g., China, Russia) and it will tempt others to once again let Uncle Sam bear a disproportionate share of the burden.

Biden’s essay offers a host of perfectly sensible ideas (e.g., ending the forever wars, reinvesting in our diplomatic corps, rebuilding infrastructure, devoting more resources to research and development, etc.), but he also wants America to “continue lifting up women and girls around the world,” to focus on “combating corruption as a core national security interest,” and to rally the free world behind “the electric idea of liberty.” Worthy goals, but each entails meddling in

other countries, telling other societies what to do and how to live, and otherwise engaging in unpredictable efforts at social engineering abroad. And while we're advancing these noble ideals, Biden also intends to reaffirm the "sacred" commitment to NATO, maintain our "ironclad commitment to Israel's security," "reinvest in our treaty alliances in Asia," and "do more to integrate our friends in Latin America and Africa into the broader network of democracies."

And that's just a part of his agenda. If Biden and his team tore this to-do list in half and decided to work on the items that were left, they would still be very busy indeed.

Biden's pick to run the National Security Council—Jake Sullivan—is on the same page as his future boss. Writing in the Atlantic in January 2019, Sullivan sought to reclaim the idea of American exceptionalism, in order to persuade an increasingly skeptical public to continue shouldering the burdens of global leadership. In his words, "The public will accept major investment in foreign policy only if it believes the United States is not just a normal country, with normal responsibilities." Yet on closer inspection, Sullivan's notion of "exceptionalism" turns out to be the familiar nostrum that America "has a unique capacity and responsibility to help make the world a better place." "We live in a country of problem-solvers," he writes, "in a world full of problems."

Even if true, it does not follow that every problem in the world would be properly met by a solution that is made in America. Nor does it follow that solving every global problem is in America's interest. Sometimes it will be; at other times, a foreign power may be better positioned and have greater incentive to provide a solution. Both Sullivan and Biden acknowledge that the United States is not perfect and has made mistakes in the past, but we shouldn't dwell on them for too long or hold those responsible accountable. After all, Sullivan writes, "A nation's foreign policy is the total of imperfect decisions made by imperfect people facing imperfect choices with imperfect information." Granted, but that hardly absolves them (and us) from the responsibility to learn from past mistakes instead of repeating them.

Moreover, what may be a genuine strength of Team Biden—familiarity, experience working in past administrations, etc.—may also be a liability. Although there will undoubtedly be disagreements within the next administration over tactical decisions or even larger strategic priorities, these debates will be taking place among a group of people with strikingly similar world views and a certain nostalgia for earlier eras of U.S. primacy. The danger, as Walter Lippmann once cautioned, is that "when all think alike, no one thinks very much." One need not fully embrace the notion of a "team of rivals" to believe that the Biden administration might benefit from a few appointees who had managed to be on the opposite side of earlier debates over NATO enlargement, the war in Iraq, the intervention in Libya, or the 2009 surge in Afghanistan.

Biden's vocal commitment to democracy is also somewhat worrisome. To be sure, restoring amity to America's relations with other democratic countries makes sense in the wake of Trump's petulant boorishness and his envious admiration of various authoritarian rulers. But Biden's pledge to convene a global Summit for Democracy during his first year in office and his frequent invocation of clichés like "the free world" could cause more problems than it solves.

For starters, given the parlous state of America's own democracy, it is just a tad presumptuous for Biden to summon other leaders to Washington to "renew the spirit and shared purpose of the nations of the free world." Second, will the guest list be confined to fully *liberal* democracies, or will it also include India, Turkey, Poland, Hungary, Israel, or other states whose democratic orders fall well short of liberal ideals? Third, making democracy the centerpiece of Biden's foreign policy will turn America's deepening rivalry with China into an ideological contest, making cooperation on issues such as climate change harder and rendering the possibility of long-term coexistence less tenable. Highlighting democracy in this fashion could also put the administration back on a slippery slope toward various forms of regime change. If they genuinely believe in the "electric idea of liberty," how will they resist the urge to support groups who are seeking to topple a dictator or advance some other set of liberal values?

Which brings me to my final concern. As soon as Biden takes office, he and his associates will receive a steady stream of requests from a long line of supplicants. Europeans will want to know what he'll do about Ukraine, or the Greece-Turkey dispute in the Aegean, or the transatlantic rift over Big Tech. Asian countries will want more help balancing China, and Afghans, Somalis, and more than a few others will be lobbying to keep U.S. troops committed against the Taliban, the Islamic State, al-Shabab, or whoever. America's traditional Middle East clients will push hard to keep Biden from rejoining the nuclear deal with Iran; if he goes ahead anyway, they'll lobby for more U.S. weaponry and additional security assurances as compensation. You won't hear any of these countries volunteering to do more to help Uncle Sam, however, and if history is any guide, lofty promises to take greater responsibility for their own security will go unfulfilled.

The question is: How will Biden & Co. respond as these requests start piling up? Which regions will get first dibs, and which countries will be told to do more for themselves? The concept of buck-passing—the idea of getting others to do the heavy lifting instead of trying to do it all yourself—seems to largely absent from Team Biden's worldview, and so I fear they'll spend too much time convincing others that Trump was just a temporary aberration and too little time getting allies to pull their own weight.

Don't get me wrong: I hope the Biden team is able to avoid both the overweening ambitions of the unipolar era and the ineffective shambles of the Trump years, and I'll be delighted if my misgivings prove unfounded. Indeed, despite having written an entire book arguing that America's foreign-policy elite was stubbornly committed to a failing grand strategy and resistant to either accountability or reform, I'll be more than pleasantly surprised if Team Biden embraces a different approach. Go ahead, Joe: Prove me wrong.