



## The Biden-Blinken doctrine: hubris or humility?

By James Carden

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On August 22, The Washington Post published a [glowing profile](#) of the current US secretary of state titled, “Can Antony Blinken update liberal foreign policy for a world gone mad? Inside the shaping and execution of the Biden-Blinken doctrine.”

The author, a former beat reporter for the DC suburbs and longtime contributor to the Post’s Style section, seemed to be the perfect fit for the PR exercise. Which isn’t to say the profile is without value: The stenographer’s pen provides a clear record of how the State Department Seventh Floor views itself – and, perhaps more important, wants to present itself to the world.

Yet in a number of respects, the view Blinken and the White House have of their handling of the conflict in Ukraine is at odds with reality.

Blinken’s February 17 presentation before the United Nations Security Council is described as something of a diplomatic *tour de force*. The Post informs us that Blinken, “in strikingly precise terms, offered his version of the immediate future – ‘here’s what the world can expect to see unfold’ – as if glimpsed in an especially apocalyptic crystal ball.

“‘This crisis directly affects every member of this council and every country in the world,’ said Blinken. ‘Because the basic principles that sustain peace and security – principles that were enshrined in the wake of two world wars and a Cold War – are under threat.’”

Yet in the months that followed, the world has failed to see it thusly. Blinken’s crystal ball no doubt predicted a world that would rally in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, united behind a US-imposed sanctions regime aimed at imposing unacceptable costs on the Russian economy, thereby threatening the very existence of the Putin regime itself.

It turns out Blinken’s crystal ball is about as good as everyone else’s. Six months into the war, Russia is far from being isolated. As Reuters reported on August 17, “efforts to isolate Russia at the UN have [stalled](#).”

Reuters reports that “Western countries are shying away from some specific moves, fearing tepid support, as rising vote abstentions have signaled a growing unwillingness to publicly oppose Moscow.”

Meantime, the Cato Institute’s Ted Galen Carpenter recently noted:

“The rest of the global map confirms that [virtually no countries](#) in the Middle East, Central and South Asia, Africa, or even Latin America have responded favorably to Washington’s pressure and imposed economic sanctions. It is especially significant that such key powers as China, India, South Africa, Indonesia, Brazil and Mexico remain on the sidelines.”

In other words, US President Joe Biden’s and Antony Blinken’s ham-fisted response to the Ukraine crisis unwittingly sped up the emergence of the post-American world order.

Yet there is little indication that they understand what has happened.

The core thesis of the Washington Post profile is that Biden and Blinken have set out, with “humility and confidence,” to “reimagine American foreign policy – and, against all odds, to try to save the old liberal international order – by striking a new balance between these two very contradictory ideals.”

There are any number of terms to describe the Biden-Blinken engagement with the world, but “humility” surely is not one of them.

After all, Blinken’s pointed refusal to engage in diplomacy before and during the Russian war in Ukraine hardly indicates a turn toward humility: Blinken and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov have spoken only once in six months.

The sanctions policy carried out by Biden is, likewise, the very antithesis of humility. The abuse of the dollar’s position by US Treasury Department’s Office of Foreign Assets Control has long been a source of [vexation to friend](#) and foe alike. The policy of confiscating and/or freezing of foreign gold and currency reserves took an unprecedented turn this past March when the US [froze](#) \$300 billion in Russian Central Bank assets.

Yet the asset freeze and Russia’s exclusion from the international payment system SWIFT has, in the [view](#) of [some experts](#), only sped up the process of the de-dollarization of the global economy. With hubris comes nemesis: The days of the dollar’s “exorbitant privilege” as the global reserve currency are [numbered](#).

Nevertheless, the Post praises the new era of diplomacy in Biden’s Washington for signaling “a new empathy for foreign partners’ points of view.”

Which is all well and good, but empathy needs to be extended to one’s enemies as well – indeed, the imperative to empathize in international diplomacy is arguably *even more* acute when dealing with one’s rivals.

As the editor and journalist Katrina vanden Heuvel and I [argued](#) as the Ukraine crisis was approaching its crescendo last December, the Biden administration would have been better served by embracing policy of strategic empathy that simply “requires that the president and his national-security team ask themselves: How might *they* react if the military and economic pressure the US routinely applies against designated adversaries was aimed in *our* direction?”

This is the very opposite of the Biden-Blinken doctrine, which seems to be “keep your friends close and ignore your enemies.”

Perhaps the best thing that can be said about it is that it was built for another time. The doctrine seems to have nothing to say about the principal challenge the US faces currently and into the medium- to long-term future: the emergence of a multipolar world.

The Biden-Blinken doctrine, with its goal of trying “to save the old liberal international order,” is attempting to navigate the current geopolitical environment with an operating system 20 to 30 years out of date.

The retired career Indian diplomat M K Bhadrakumar recently observed that for India, “The choice is between a subaltern role for perpetuation of America’s global hegemony and Western dominance in the international system, or a more just world order where countries can pursue their own paths of development as equals with mutual respect. It is nonsense that without the US conducting itself as the world policeman, ‘anarchy’ will set in.”

Bhadrakumar’s binary applies with equal force to the other BRICS, the countries of the Non-Aligned Movement, and the Global South.

Having nothing to say about the emerging multipolar world, the Biden-Blinken doctrine misses the moment: It is simply more American hubris wrapped in a cloak of humility.

In the end, a foreign policy based on the illusions of a “US-led rules based international order” only serves to encourage the worst instincts of the US foreign-policy establishment all the while alienating the rest of the world.