

# THE NATIONAL INTEREST

## Is Biden's Foreign Policy Clumsiness Due to Incompetence or Arrogance?

Ted Galen Carpenter

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Recent events have caused alarm even within the Democratic party.

The dominant narrative in the news media is that the election of Joe Biden means that the “adults” and “professionals” are now back in charge of U.S. foreign policy after four years of dangerous, amateurish behavior by Donald Trump and his appointees. Events are proving otherwise. Several early Biden administration actions should sound alarm bells with both Congress and the American people. The only question is whether those missteps reflect incompetence or arrogance.

One troubling sign occurred even before Biden took the oath of office. He invited Taiwan’s *de facto* ambassador to the United States to attend his inauguration, the first time that honor had been given since the United States switched diplomatic relations to the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1979. Not even Trump or George W. Bush, who were staunch supporters of Taiwan, did anything that bold to show disdain for Beijing’s position. The gesture got the new administration’s relations with the PRC off to a frosty start. It seems unlikely that Biden and his advisers were unaware of how Xi Jinping’s government would react. However, if that’s the case, the only other explanation is that they knew it was a provocation but did not care. Either version is worrisome.

Biden and his foreign policy team have made some other questionable moves that impact U.S.-China relations. In his first telephone conversation with Japan’s new prime minister, Yoshihide Suga, Biden reiterated that the mutual defense treaty between the two countries covers the uninhabited Senkaku island chain, which China also claims. In late February, Pentagon spokesman John Kirby escalated matters when he stated that Washington supported Japan’s “sovereignty” over the Senkakus. His comment signaled a significant shift in U.S. policy. Washington’s official position has been that while the United States would resist any use of force to end Tokyo’s administration of the islets, it did not take any position regarding the merits of the territorial dispute itself. Kirby’s statement put the United States on record as endorsing Tokyo’s claim, and he had to beat a retreat the next day with a “clarification” reaffirming the established policy. Such a chaotic performance does not inspire confidence.

East Asia is not the only arena in which the new administration’s behavior has been unsettling. In late February, the White House ordered air strikes against Syria because pro-Iranian militias had conducted attacks on U.S. military installations in neighboring Iraq. Two aspects of that decision promptly drew criticism. First, the president approved the bombing raids without

consulting Congress, basing his alleged authority on a wildly expansive interpretation of the 2001 Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF) against Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups following the 9-11 attacks. Biden's move generated immediate criticism, including from Democrats in Congress, who rejected the notion that the AUMF covered air strikes two decades later on a country that had no connection whatever with 9/11. The administration's decision to use military force without any coordination with the president's own party in Congress indicated either an arrogant embrace of the imperial presidency or sheer clumsiness.

Another aspect of the decision was worse. Even though Russia has a sizable military presence in Syria to support President Bashar al-Assad's beleaguered regime in that country's civil war, the United States apparently gave Moscow only four-to-five minutes advance notice. Such an extremely short period could have led to a dangerous incident. Russian personnel help operate Syria's air defense system, and one can readily imagine the reaction if an American plane had been shot down during the raid. Another, even greater, risk is that the attack could have killed Russian military personnel who did not have time to take adequate shelter. It was a needless peril that could have been—and should have been—avoided. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov complained bitterly about Washington's conduct. The episode certainly did nothing to soothe already acrimonious U.S.-Russia relations.

The Biden administration's initial foreign policy performance has been not merely unimpressive, but alarming. If this boorish amateurism is what America can expect from supposedly experienced professionals, the United States is in for a rough ride over the next four years.

*Ted Galen Carpenter, a senior fellow in security studies at the Cato Institute and a contributing editor at the National Interest, is the author of twelve books and more than 900 articles on international affairs.*