



The Biden Administration Is Failing to Set Intelligent Foreign Policy Priorities

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Some of the main features of President Joe Biden's security policy are coming into focus, but the greater clarity does not necessarily offer much comfort. The administration seems intent on pursuing hardline policies toward both Russia and China. Indeed, Secretary of State Antony Blinken urged U.S. democratic allies to join Washington's efforts to counter the supposedly disruptive ambitions of those two countries. Decades ago, Henry Kissinger wisely counseled against such an approach. He emphasized that U.S. leaders should always make certain that Washington's relations with Moscow and Beijing are closer than their ties are with each other. The current approach ostentatiously violates Kissinger's important principle.

That aspect of the administration's foreign policy would be worrisome enough; however, the overall picture is even more troubling. In addition to antagonizing two great powers simultaneously, the Biden foreign policy team is not doing much to deemphasize the laundry list of Washington's other, longstanding objectives around the world. It's true that Biden has announced the withdrawal of U.S. troops from the seemingly endless mission in Afghanistan. But the details of the plan suggest that the change may be more cosmetic than substantive. Reports are circulating that Washington merely intends to relocate some of its military personnel and Pentagon contractors (many of whom are armed mercenaries) to neighboring countries in Central Asia.

Other components of the so-called war on terror also appear to be intact. U.S. military support for factions opposed to Syria's President Bashar al-Assad seems to be growing and not receding. Even the much-touted decision to end U.S. backing for the Saudi coalition's war in Yemen is not amounting to much. Washington still is providing intelligence and logistical support for "defensive" Saudi military activities—a concept that seems very broad indeed. Even as the United States prepares to confront Russia and China, it remains mired in the Middle East. Such an approach is the operational definition of strategic overextension.

The administration's confrontational stance toward Russia should not come as much of a surprise. Biden and his fellow Democrats spent four years pushing the conspiracy theory that President Donald Trump was Vladimir Putin's puppet. That narrative also portrayed Russia as a monstrous dictatorship and an existential threat to the United States. Once in office, Biden and his advisors exacerbated tensions quickly, imposing new economic sanctions on Russia, calling Putin a "killer," and increasing U.S. backing for Ukraine in that country's various disputes with Moscow. The belated willingness to call for a summit meeting between Biden and Putin does not materially alter the marked deterioration in bilateral relations.

More surprising is the hardline approach that the administration has adopted toward Beijing, which has resulted in perpetuating the high level of tensions that developed during the Trump years. Analysts in the United States and abroad expected the new administration to break with its predecessor and pursue a more conciliatory policy. Yet that hope has not materialized. Even with respect to trade and other economic issues, the Biden approach has been little better than "Trump lite." On security issues, the policies of the two administrations have exhibited even greater similarities.

Biden has especially continued Trump's staunch support for Taiwan, with officials emphasizing that Washington's backing is "rock solid." Similarly, the new administration is pressing Japan to play a stronger role in an implicit policy to contain China's power. It also has emphasized the continuing U.S. commitment to protect Japan's possession and control of the Senkaku (Diaoyu) islands, which Beijing also claims.

The Biden administration's inability to set priorities heightens the risks to America. In particular, Washington's strategic myopia is driving Russia and China together, increasing their diplomatic, economic, and military cooperation to resist U.S. pressure. Given the lengthy border between Russia and China and the inherent jockeying of the two countries for a dominant position in Central Asia, Moscow and Beijing should have more to fear from each other than either would from the United States. It requires extraordinarily clumsy, abrasive behavior on Washington's part to forfeit that advantage.

Ideally, U.S. policymakers should seek ways to reduce tensions with both powers. At a minimum, Washington needs to make a choice—pursuing a rapprochement with one country in order to focus on effectively waging a strategic rivalry with the other. A sober assessment would indicate that the wiser course would be to repair relations with Russia. Russia's \$1.5 trillion economy ranks eleventh in the world, just ahead of Australia's \$1.48 trillion. Conversely, China's \$16.8 trillion makes that country the world's second-largest economic power. Those figures mean that Russia is a second-tier economic player, while China is a strong peer competitor that is closing fast on the United States. Moreover, Beijing has assiduously used its financial capabilities to cultivate influence around the world.

From the standpoint of military power, Russia might seem to be the more dangerous adversary, but Moscow's clout is due almost entirely to its large nuclear arsenal. In terms of

conventional weaponry, China's military (especially its navy), is at least as potent as Russia's conventional forces, given Beijing's focus over the past two decades on developing highly sophisticated systems. Moreover, as astute experts have noted, while nuclear weapons may be useful for deterrence, they are not particularly effective for bullying other countries. And unless a country's leaders want it to commit national suicide, such weapons are not useful for warfighting.

Russia definitely is a relevant great power, but it is not in China's league. As stated earlier, Washington's best approach would be to mend ties with both Moscow and Beijing. But if Biden administration officials are determined to have the United States confront a potential global rival and contain its power, China is by far the stronger challenger to America's position as the incumbent hegemon. That reality means that the United States needs to pursue a rapprochement with Moscow as soon as possible. Washington's current course creates the risk of a U.S. collision with a Chinese-Russian alliance, and that outcome might well be extremely unpleasant for the United States.

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