



Joe Biden's Foreign Policy Dream Team Is Disappointing

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January 6, 2021

Anyone hoping that Joe Biden's presidency might embrace new thinking on foreign policy and a greater receptivity to the concept of restraint needs to abandon such hopes at this point. Most of the president-elect's personnel selections for defense and foreign policy posts were members of the Obama administration's junior varsity. Their undeserved elevation to the varsity team reflects the pervasive attitude within the establishment wing of the Democratic Party that everything was just fine with U.S. foreign policy until the irresponsible, "isolationist" Donald Trump wrecked America's position in the world. The proper goal, according to that view, is to restore the status quo ante.

But everything was not fine with U.S. foreign policy when Obama left office. Far from it. The administration had launched not one, not two, but three disastrous military interventions—in Libya, Syria, and Yemen—thereby sowing more destruction and chaos throughout the Middle East. Obama and his minions also had further damaged already frayed relations with Russia by supporting demonstrators who overthrew the duly elected, pro-Russian president of Ukraine, Viktor Yanukovich. Too many of Biden's announced appointees were proponents of those misadventures.

As I've written elsewhere, Biden himself was surprisingly cautious regarding the missions in the Muslim world. He strongly opposed the decision to overthrow Libya's Muammar Qaddafi—for very good reason, as the subsequent tragic situation in that country confirmed. Biden also was extremely worried that radical Islamist elements were dominating the Syrian rebellion against Bashar al-Assad that Washington and its allies were supporting. His instincts proved to be correct in that case as well. According to Ben Rhodes, Obama's deputy national security adviser, "the only senior official who consistently opposed sending more troops to Afghanistan was Joe Biden."

Unfortunately, Biden exhibited no such worthwhile instincts regarding U.S. policy toward Ukraine and Russia. Indeed, as the transcript of the infamous leaked phone call between Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland and U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine Geoffrey Pyatt showed, Biden was the designated point man to bless the successor regime in Kiev that Washington was helping to take power. Nuland was confident the vice president was ready and willing to play that role.

While Biden's views on foreign policy appear to be mixed, those of his new appointees are almost uniformly troubling. Biden's choice for secretary of state, Tony Blinken, favored an activist, militarized approach in both Libya and Syria. In the latter case, his policy preference included arming the motley Syrian rebels. Several of Biden's other choices for key positions, including Jake Sullivan, designated to be national security adviser, and Avril Haines, the nominee for director of national intelligence, have well-earned reputations for embracing regime-change wars and other dubious positions. His choice for secretary of defense, retired Gen. Lloyd Austin, was the head of the U.S. military's Central Command, and there is little evidence that he ever dissented regarding Washington's ill-starred Middle East interventions. Perhaps worse, Austin comes from the board of Raytheon, one of the corporations profiting the most from Washington's continued, heavy-handed military presence in that region. We're unlikely to get consideration of a more restrained Middle East policy from the crew that Biden is forming.

Prospects are no better for new thinking on other foreign policy issues. Members of Biden's team seem fully on board with respect to maintaining, or even intensifying, a hardline policy toward Moscow. In a November 25, 2020 interview, Blinken stated: "President Biden would be in the business of confronting Mr. Putin for his aggressions, not embracing him. Not trashing NATO, but strengthening its deterrence ... and give robust security assistance to countries like Ukraine, Georgia, the Western Balkans." There was no indication of flexibility on Blinken's part about extending even a small olive branch to Moscow.

Equally sterile thinking on European issues is evident from the comments of other Biden nominees. His choice for deputy secretary of defense, Kathleen Hicks, even opposed Trump's tepid plan to withdraw some 11,900 U.S. troops from Germany. She did so even though approximately half of those forces were simply going to be redeployed to other North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) countries—including some 1,000 to Poland, a move in line with a more confrontational policy toward Russia. Moreover, the move had little operational military significance: Washington still intended to retain nearly 25,000 military personnel in Germany. It's worth recalling that during portions of the Cold War, the United States had nearly 400,000 troops in Europe—most of them in Germany. If reducing force levels from that figure all the way to 34,500 (the level that existed when the Trump administration announced the drawdown) didn't drastically alter the military equation, it's difficult to see how withdrawing another 11,900 would have much impact.

The attitude that Hicks exhibited confirmed that proposals for even the mildest change in NATO policy toward a less dominant U.S. role likely will be summarily dismissed in a Biden administration. Once again, that is not a blueprint for policy innovation.

Surveying the views of the Biden foreign policy team, one is struck by the extent of utterly conventional thinking. That might not be so bad if the underlying assumption that U.S. foreign policy was in good shape before Trump took office was true. But U.S. policy exhibited multiple signs of dysfunction during the pre-Trump era, and those problems badly need to be addressed and corrected. Unfortunately, the policy team that Biden has assembled exhibits little or no ability to undertake that vital task.

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