

# 1945

## How Many Wars Does Joe Biden Want To Fight?

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President Joe Biden took the U.S. out of Afghanistan, ending the desultory 20-year conflict. Although deadly and costly, it was, by World War II or even Vietnam War standards, a small affair. The Afghan people paid a high price, but foreign deaths have rarely generated much concern among the American people.

In any case, Biden deserves credit for doing what Presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump would not, even though they also recognized that the conflict should end. The choice was either leave and accept the loss or stay forever and pretend to win. Even after the Biden administration's blundering exit the majority of Americans believed that he did the right thing. Leave Afghanistan for the Afghans. At least good Ol' Uncle Joe did the right thing once on foreign policy.

But it increasingly looks like it might only be once. Indeed, having dumped one small war, the president and his aides appear ready to start three big ones. At once. Is anyone in the administration in charge? Do they know what they are doing?

First is Iran. Negotiations for restoring the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action have foundered and Secretary of State Antony Blinken met with Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, offering barely veiled threats of war if an accord is not reached. Yet it is U.S. behavior which is at fault.

President Donald Trump walked away from the agreement forged by his predecessor and imposed brutal economic sanctions on Iran, intended to wreck its economy and force its surrender. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo set forth humiliating terms which no sovereign nation would accept. Then the administration waited. And waited.

Instead of yielding, Tehran launched a multi-faceted resistance campaign which culminated in allied militia attacks on American bases and embassy in Iraq. A chastened Pompeo was forced to admit that the U.S. could not defend its embassy, which he threatened to close. By the end of his

administration, Trump was publicly begging the Iranians to negotiate, to no avail. Because of his reckless policy, Tehran was much closer to making a nuclear weapon when he left office.

Instead of taking the first step to restoring an agreement ruptured by its predecessor, the Biden administration attempted to squeeze additional concessions from Iran and refused to offer any assurances for its own compliance. Then, having made agreement impossible, it threatened military action, presumably in league with Israel, whose previous government made little effort to hide its desire to fight Iran to the last American.

Iran is more populous than Iraq, a real country, even civilization. Tehran possesses notable asymmetric military capabilities, many of which it used during the Trump administration. Although Iran would lose any conventional fight, it could wreak havoc across the Middle East. War also would demonstrate that a nuclear capability is absolutely essential for its defense, causing Tehran to dig even deeper underground in preparation for the next round. Such a disaster would be entirely Biden's fault.

And it would be enough to wreck Biden's presidency as well as the Middle East. Few Europeans would even pretend to follow U.S. leadership afterward. Worse, champagne corks would go off amid riotous celebration in both the Kremlin and Zhongnanhai, as America's greatest rivals celebrated an even more catastrophic war and an even more incredible blunder, proof that Washington's arrogant foreign policy establishment knew nothing, learned nothing, and remembered nothing.

However, the Biden administration did not stop there. Lloyd Austin, whose portfolio as Secretary of Defense is supposed to be focused on *America's* "defense," made the rounds of Europe, where he advocated the inclusion of Georgia and Ukraine in NATO. It's a bad idea that got its initial push under the Bush administration, evidence enough that it should be rejected. Neither country has any relevance to American security. Both have histories of reckless leaders eager to drag America into war. Both are redlines for Russia—imagine Washington's reaction had the Soviet Union meddled in elections in Mexico and Canada and then invited those governments to join the Warsaw Pact.

Should the worst happen and war break out with Moscow, most of America's NATO allies would run in the opposite direction, leaving the fight to Washington. It would be no cakewalk: Russia would have more at stake, concentrate a preponderance of forces at the critical point, and deploy nuclear weapons to deter Americans from taking advantage of its full superiority. Imagine if the U.S. found itself at war with Iran and Russia simultaneously—as most of the Europeans mailed in their best wishes.

At least the prospect of Moscow and Washington fighting over Kyiv and/or Tbilisi appears to be mostly theoretical at the moment. Not so the possibility of conflict between China and Taiwan, between whom tensions have been steadily rising.

Most members of the Blob, as the foreign policy establishment is called, believe the U.S. should be ready to go to war with China over the island, which escaped the Chinese Communist Party when Chiang Kai-shek and his defeated Nationalists fled there after their defeat on the mainland.

Indeed, U.S. analysts have been debating the idea of dropping Washington's currently ambiguous stance—refusing to say yes or no—and making a clear commitment. Although the idea of *not* going to war is almost entirely absent in the capital, most analysts have convinced themselves that talking tough would be enough to scare off the Chinese.

However, Taiwan is the final Chinese territory stolen away during the “Century of Humiliation,” and even younger Chinese back their government's claim. In such a contest angry nationalism commonly trumps good sense, as in America's Civil War. Americans who believe Beijing will yield its claim to Taiwan without a fight risk sleepwalking into a major war, as have so many other self-assured fools throughout history.

In any case, the president recently went off-script and declared that America would fight. His aides quickly corrected the record, so to speak, as did President George W. Bush after making a similar promise in 2001. Nevertheless, Beijing has seen more than enough continuity between the Trump and Biden administrations toward China and is likely to assume the worst, irrespective of Washington's verbal legerdemain. So if the People's Republic of China decides war is necessary and believes the U.S. will fight, the People's Liberation Army will act swiftly and brutally, hoping to win before the U.S.—nearly 8000 miles away—can interfere.

War with China would be even worse than with Russia. The PRC would have more at stake in the fight, local superiority, a couple score bases on the mainland roughly 100 miles away, and a victim that so far has shown little inclination to defend itself. In combat the U.S. would have little choice but to strike the mainland, which would trigger escalation, with no obvious endpoint. Indeed, Washington, attempting to fight from half a world away, has done poorly in wargames. It is far easier for Beijing to deter the U.S. than for America to project sufficient power to defeat the PRC. And even a U.S. victory would probably be just the first round, as a nationalistic Chinese public prepared for round two. How much is Taiwan worth to the U.S.?

Worse, imagine if Washington faced simultaneous crises, perhaps with Iran, Russia, and China at once. While most of America's allies discovered that they were busy, very busy, but nevertheless wished the U.S. well. Indeed, they would make a *very* strong statement as the bullets and missiles started flying.

President Biden has always seen himself as an internationalist. That doesn't mean he should start a war, however. Indeed, he is one of the few policymakers who today understands the reality of war. He entered public life about the same time that the Nixon administration was pulling the last U.S. troops out of Vietnam. It has been almost a half century since America fought a conflict with heavy casualties, extended ground combat, heavy air action, and mass protest at home.

However, all could return if the administration managed to stumble into one or more major wars. At least a conflict with Russia or China would make the American people forget Biden's ragged exit from Afghanistan. However, if he wants to be reelected—and, more important, to be a good president, however long he serves—then he should concentrate on avoiding real war with real opponents, and especially multiple conflicts at once.

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