



The World Is Starting to Doubt Biden’s Promise That ‘America Is Back’

From omicron restrictions to the Iran deal and the democracy summit, Washington is making questionable calls that don’t inspire confidence in U.S. leadership.

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Hey, Matt, I have a question: Why do the new COVID-19 variants always sound like they were created by James Bond villains? I mean, omicron is the perfect name for an evil secret society.

Matthew Kroenig: Ha! Hi Emma, good question. As you know, the World Health Organization uses the Greek alphabet and rumor has it that talking about the “nu variant” would confuse people and then they skipped over xi, directly to omicron, for obvious geopolitical reasons.

I just hope we never make it to omega; I am over this pandemic.

What do you make of the threat posed by this new—but not nu—variant and the swift international response, including tougher travel restrictions by the United States?

EA: It’s like being stuck in a time warp: a new variant, new travel bans, and politicians talking about how dangerous this new variant might be without any actual evidence. Then there are others talking about how this variant might be beneficial because it’s milder than delta, again with very little evidence. I’m certainly no epidemiologist, but it seems premature to jump immediately to further bans and shutdowns when we know nothing at all about this variant and the disease is widespread already.

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MK: I'd like to argue with you, but I think we mostly agree. The incentives are skewed. Politicians will be more harshly criticized for underreacting than overreacting, so they continue to impose restrictions while society pays the cost.

U.S. President Joe Biden imposed a travel ban on eight southern African countries, including four with zero reported cases. When asked about the logic of this decision, Biden's chief medical advisor, Anthony Fauci, said, "You know, that's a very good question."

With most of the country fully vaccinated, it seems that it is time to get back to a new normal and learn to live with COVID-19, like we live with other lingering diseases.

EA: In that case, I'll just use this space for a public service announcement: Travel bans don't work. A recent study from the Cato Institute found that even the early COVID-19 travel bans did almost nothing to stop or slow the spread of disease in the United States. Often, countries close their borders to foreigners but continue to allow nationals to return without testing or quarantine, and they are doing it again with omicron, as if they haven't learned anything. It's probable that some of the early border closures in 2020—which prompted horrific overcrowding at U.S. airports as tons of Americans returned home—actually helped to spread the disease more widely!

Further travel bans will just hurt the economy and keep families apart. Period.

MK: OK. It sounds like we largely agree on omicron. What can we debate?

EA: The big news out of Washington this week was the non-release of the Pentagon's long-promised Global Posture Review. I say "non-release" because apparently U.S. officials decided that it wasn't even worth releasing an unclassified version of the document. Instead, they just issued a press release to explain that they weren't planning any major changes to U.S. force posture!

Seriously, what kind of comprehensive review concludes with an assessment that "we realized in the aggregate that the force posture around the world was about right"?

MK: I also found the process puzzling. The new U.S. National Defense Strategy is scheduled for release early next year. Force posture should follow strategy, not the other way around. I was also expecting the review to announce a more significant shift of forces from the Middle East (the Pentagon's primary theater over the past several decades) to the Indo-Pacific (the current priority).

But I have to say I am pleased we didn't see a drastic shift. The United States is still a global superpower. It has significant interests in Europe and the Middle East, so it doesn't make sense to fully withdraw forces from those theaters and move everything to Asia. The United States has been a global superpower for decades and a force posture review that says the existing posture is "about right" says that Washington intends to stay a global superpower.

EA: I'm honestly surprised to hear you say that. You're certainly right that it seems somewhat pointless to conduct a posture review prior to the release of the National Security Strategy or

National Defense Strategy. But I'm surprised you're not with those who are arguing that the review did too little to shift assets towards China. That was the response of many of the China hawks on Capitol Hill.

MK: Before I respond, what was your take? I suspect you were hoping to see more of a drawdown of U.S. forces from some theaters, such as the Middle East.

EA: I have two thoughts on the review. First, it definitely doesn't propose any of the posture changes I think are vital to the future of U.S. security. Washington will maintain sizable deployments and bases in the Middle East—even though the war on the Islamic State is over—and will not reprioritize forces from Europe to Asia as needed. The review also didn't consider a variety of hot-button issues, including space, cyber, and whether the United States should have any future counterterrorism footprint in Afghanistan.

Second, though, I think it's notable that I'm hardly alone in my dislike for the posture review's conclusions. Hawks think it didn't prioritize Asia enough, doves think it didn't retrench enough. The main problem with the posture review is that it was completely irrelevant. I'm honestly not sure how the Pentagon managed to take a year to come to such insipid conclusions.

MK: Many hawks wanted to move more forces to Asia, but others (including me) were concerned that the Pentagon would go too far in drawing down from other regions. The United States and its allies still face threats from Russia in Europe and Iran and terrorism in the Middle East. Moreover, the China challenge is a global one, so if Washington puts all its resources toward, say, defending Taiwan, Beijing will simply hit the United States somewhere else. Allies in Europe, such as the Baltics and Poland, and in the Middle East, such as the Gulf states, were anxiously awaiting the results of this review, and they will be pleased to see that we are not abandoning them anytime soon.

EA: Asking allies to contribute appropriately to their own defense—rather than relying on the United States to carry the burden alone—is hardly abandoning them.

MK: I agree allies should do more, but there is still a need for a significant U.S. presence in Europe and the Middle East. Speaking of Europe and the Middle East, negotiators are in Vienna this week seeking a diplomatic solution to Iran's expanding nuclear program. Will they succeed?

EA: Like a lot of people in Washington, I'm increasingly pessimistic that the negotiations with Iran will succeed. Things have changed since the original deal: a more conservative government in Tehran, Iranian advances in enrichment, and a U.S. government that cannot credibly promise long-term sanctions relief. While it isn't out of the question, the window for a deal is extremely narrow and closing fast.

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MK: Indeed. Outside experts estimate that Iran’s “dash time” to one bomb’s worth of weapons-grade uranium is now down to as little as three weeks. Tehran is happy to delay diplomacy as it inches closer to nuclear weapons possession. I am afraid that we are witnessing a repeat of North Korea: A rogue state builds nuclear weapons as the rest of the world pins all its hopes on negotiations that are clearly going nowhere.

Bringing other voices in would empower the democratic cause.

Ebrahim Raisi needs a deal. Military threats from Washington would derail any remaining hopes of achieving one.

Tehran will only be motivated to negotiate seriously if the international community persuades it that its current path will result in intolerable consequences. The United States and Israel should put credible military options for destroying Iran’s nuclear facilities back on the table.

They might have to employ those options as a last resort, but, in the meantime, this will motivate China and other powers to apply more economic pressure on Iran, as they will want to prevent an Iranian nuclear bomb and war in the Middle East. China prizes regional stability and access to energy resources above all else, so it can become a reluctant partner in a nonproliferation pressure campaign if we give it the right incentives.

At some point, the Biden administration will have to ask itself if it is really worth a war with Iran to prevent nuclear proliferation.

EA: At some point, the Biden administration will have to ask itself if it is really worth a war with Iran to prevent nuclear proliferation. It’s effectively impossible to halt a nuclear program through targeted strikes alone—countries just rebuild and dig deeper to hide facilities—so to really prevent an Iranian bomb, you’re talking about a substantive war and potential regime change in one of the biggest countries in the Middle East.

In addition to being a truly terrible idea, that doesn’t seem like something the U.S. public is going to support after 20 years of Middle Eastern quagmires. Nor are other countries likely to support it after our own government was the one that violated the nuclear deal first.

Which is why, even though it is challenging, the administration needs to try to find some common ground with Iran, perhaps an interim deal that would freeze their enrichment in exchange for some sanctions relief. It’s not great, but all the other options are worse.

MK: A freeze of further sanctions in exchange for a freeze of Iran’s program could make sense, but Tehran is demanding the United States lift all post-2015 U.S.-imposed sanctions before Iran even touches its nuclear program. That is unreasonable. Washington needs to do something to make Tehran come to its senses.

I’ve carefully studied the military option for Iran’s nuclear program for over a decade, and while there are risks involved it is much more viable than you suggest; and it would be better than living with the dangers of a nuclear-armed Iran for decades to come. Barack Obama, Donald

Trump, and now Biden all said that they would do what it takes to stop Iran from getting the bomb, and I am counting on the current president to keep his word.

EA: The Israelis have been tacitly hinting for a while now that they will strike Iran if a deal isn't found, and that isn't making the Iranians more forthcoming.

At a more basic level, though, what are the sanctions good for if not to trade away for concessions? And while Iran's opening bid is indeed very high—all the post-2015 sanctions—I don't see why a phased process of lifting those sanctions in exchange for smaller Iranian concessions might not work.

Look, placing blame is often a little pointless, but I do think Washington needs to take a long, hard look at its role here. The United States caused this. Trump's withdrawal from the deal and reimposition of sanctions is the main reason that the world is in this pickle now. Perhaps Americans need to adopt a little humility about the fact that they might need to make some concessions too.

Iran's leaders are terrible people, by and large. But in international politics, you don't get to only talk to nice people.

MK: The United States caused this? Iran is the world's largest state-sponsor of terrorism, pursuing illegal nuclear and ballistic missile capabilities. If it were a normal country, the world wouldn't be in this pickle now.

I agree that U.S. diplomacy could have been better. Obama should not have settled for such a flawed deal and Trump should have better executed his attempted renegotiation. But we are where we are.

EA: A normal country. You mean normal countries like Iran's neighbors: Israel, with a covert nuclear weapons program that it didn't declare to the International Atomic Energy Agency? Saudi Arabia, which murders dissidents in embassies? Or the Emirate of Dubai, whose leader reportedly keeps his own daughter locked up to prevent her fleeing the country?

Iran's leaders are terrible people, by and large. But in international politics, you don't get to only talk to nice people. I'm pessimistic about the hopes for the talks in Vienna, but they really are the only good option left.

MK: Look, I don't like human rights violations committed by close U.S. security partners in the Middle East either, but none of these infractions risk turning Tel Aviv, London, or Washington into smoking, radioactive ruins. Iranian nuclear weapons would threaten that outcome, so let's keep some perspective.

And if we are going back to the fundamentals of international politics, I have one: the United States is strong, and Iran is weak. Trump demonstrated this with his strike on Iranian Maj. Gen. Qassem Suleimani. The Pentagon can turn Iran's nuclear facilities into piles of rubble by tomorrow morning and there is not much Iran can or will do in response.

I want to resolve this diplomatically too, but diplomacy will be more effective when backed by credible military options.

EA: Actually, Iran can rebuild those facilities, and we'll all be back in the same place in a few years. It can fire rockets at U.S. bases in the region and kill U.S. troops. It can orchestrate terror attacks against U.S. citizens abroad. After two decades of the War on Terror, you'd think Americans would have absorbed the lesson that even weaker actors can still cost the country dearly.

I guess we will see how the negotiations turn out. Shall we turn to some lighter news to wrap up? Next week is the administration's much ballyhooed "Summit for Democracy." Rather confusingly, the invite list includes various democracies, some seriously questionable democracies such as the Philippines, and some manifestly unfree countries such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo where the most recent "free and fair" election was widely understood to be a fraud. Apparently, Congo is being invited to represent the African Union—of which it currently holds the presidency—but still, the country's presence hardly sends a good message.

MK: There are questions about the guest list, but overall I think this is a worthy effort. As Biden has said, the international system is increasingly divided between the United States and its democratic allies at the core of the international system, and revisionist autocracies such as China and Russia. While you can debate them, there are reasons for each exception.

Bringing the democracies together to discuss shared challenges and coordinating on solutions is a needed step. Indeed, I hope this is not a one-off meeting, but that it becomes a more regular forum, possibly formalizing into a global alliance for democracy.

EA: You know my views on this. I don't think it does anyone a lot of good to divide the world into democracies and autocracies, particularly when Washington cooperates closely with a number of autocracies and backsliding democracies, and when there are so many countries in that gray area between autocracy and democracy.

I feel like this summit is just borrowing trouble. Look at the difficulties the administration had pulling together the invitation list! Any useful consultations—on digital authoritarianism and ways to combat it, for example—could easily have taken place through other forums.

MK: I disagree, but let's argue more about this next time when we can reflect on the summit's outcomes. In the meantime, I need to go take another COVID-19 test; I just got an email from one of my employers asking all staff to get tested before returning to work.

EA: There's nothing better to kick off the holiday season than sticking a Q-tip all the way up your nose. I hope you have a positive experience. Wait, I mean a negative test.