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## Biden's 'foreign policy for the middle class' seen as play for blue-collar votes

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President Joe Biden has said he wants to use foreign policy to advance the interests of working people, approaching global affairs as an extension of domestic policy. But the administration faces criticism it is attempting to formulate policy to address its top political aim at home: to reach voters in the hotly contested industrial base.

Biden's idea of a foreign policy for the middle class "takes us back to the Trump campaign in 2016," said Kiron Skinner, director of policy planning at the State Department during the Trump administration and now a professor at Carnegie Mellon University.

"It was Trump who in those 30-odd flyover states dipped down into middle America and talked about burden-sharing and NATO and commitments around the world and our national interest," said Skinner, who is also a fellow at the Heritage Foundation and Hoover Institution. "Many campaign experts, many foreign policy experts said this will never play in Peoria. But it helped get him elected."

Former President Donald Trump won Ohio in 2016 with this focus on trade and drew again from this base of support to win the state in 2020. His capture of the traditional "blue wall" states was a reckoning for Democrats. Former President Barack Obama received the most votes ever by a Democratic presidential candidate in the state's history in 2008 and returned to win the state four years later.

Trump railed against the multilateral trade policies of recent decades that many people hold responsible for cratering the American industrial base and decimating jobs.

"One of the problems with the traditional, you can call it traditional Democratic [policymaking], whether it's Clinton administration, the Carter administration, and some of the Obama administration, was investing in supporting free trade using the neoclassical simple models of economics of saying, the benefits from free trade outweigh the costs, by a feather maybe, and we should do it because economic benefits are better than economic costs," said Edward Hill, professor of public policy and public finance at Ohio State University who helped author a report

on U.S. Foreign Policy for the Middle Class alongside top Biden aides, national security adviser Jake Sullivan, and director of policy planning Salman Ahmed.

“Structure makes a difference,” Hill said. “If that abandoned mill is sitting there for four years, raising the risk of investing in that community ... and their kids think their only future is to leave, what you're saying is, ‘You are not part of America's economic future.’ That was the cost of lazy laissez-faire thinking. And what Trump did is he shone a spotlight on it.”

The purpose of what the administration calls “foreign policy for the middle class” is to promote the interests of working people, moving away from policies that privilege corporations and the country’s wealthiest, according to supporters and officials.

“We will fight for every American job and for the rights, protections, and interests of all American workers,” Secretary of State Antony Blinken said earlier this year. “Our trade policies will need to answer very clearly how they will grow the American middle class, create new and better jobs, and benefit all Americans, not only those for whom the economy is already working.”

One Ohio Democratic strategist called Biden’s messaging efforts “long overdue.” But she said that in her state, Republicans running for office are still trying to “out-Trump Trump,” a sign of his continued hold on statewide politics.

This person praised Biden’s withdrawal from Afghanistan, an effort Trump spearheaded and for which he was criticized by some in Washington as hasty and politically driven.

Justin Logan, senior fellow at the Cato Institute and an expert on U.S. foreign policy, said he viewed the message as one largely designed to target voters.

"It always struck me that this was more of a domestic political slogan than a serious strategic orientation,” Logan said. “It's good if foreign policy can win support from the middle class since they have pretty significant bearing on American elections. But as a sort of strategic doctrine, I always thought this left a lot to be desired.”

Logan questioned how far the Biden administration is likely to go in pursuing a foreign policy that appeals to the working class, whose interests tend to be more limited than officials in Washington.

“If you want to go to the American middle class and say, ‘We're spending \$70 billion a year trying to run the Middle East for you,’ they're not likely to think that that's a great use of their money,” Logan said. “Or if you say, ‘We're the primary provider of security to Western Europe, and we're doing it for you,’ people might say, ‘How is that for me? What does that do for me?’”

He continued: “If you look at the popularity of the various centerpieces of the American approach to the world, being the primary security provider to Western Europe, for example, is not super popular. Donald Trump made some hay out of whether this is a good transactional

arrangement for the United States, and I think a lot of middle-class voters thought that was a fair question.

“The peacetime commitment to the Middle East costs about \$75 billion a year. Is that the best use of American middle-class voters' money? I bet they could come up with different ways that they might like to use that money.”

Biden’s “foreign policy for the middle class” “was always a weird way to cast it, given that, to the extent middle-class voters paid attention, they might ask him pertinent questions,” Logan said.

Supporters of Biden’s middle-class outreach on foreign policy said it shouldn’t be read as doctrine.

“There's been a tendency to see it as more grandiose than its authors intended. It's not meant to be a new ideology or a new, stand-alone kind of grand theory of politics,” said Dan Baer, a senior fellow in the Europe Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. “It's just about practicing discipline as policymakers, and that discipline is thinking about ‘how is this going to affect people who, you know, a single working mom in Lexington, Kentucky, or working-class family outside of Detroit?’”

Baer, a senior Obama administration appointee, said this lens has been missing in administrations of both parties in the past.

While Biden has attempted to draw a line under the prior officeholder, the president returned from Europe with Trump-era steel tariffs in place. Though criticized as ineffective, the tariffs remain popular with some people in the U.S.

“A lot of economists will ask their own impertinent questions about how exactly American foreign policy can ‘protect American jobs.’ But those tend to be things that the public rank highly in terms of their foreign policy objectives, not dampening security competition in Western Europe, or fine-tuning the balance of power in the Middle East,” said Logan.

Of the steel tariffs, Logan said, “You may say that that's their populist aspect of their foreign policy.”

For now, the tariffs serve as leverage in negotiations with trading partners and in developing a longer-term strategy to counter China, another pillar of the Biden administration's focus.

“They're using the removal of those tariffs as a way of improving access of domestic companies to global markets and vice versa,” said Hill.

“The largest source of surplus steel, when the economies go south, is sitting in China, so I think there's a pragmatic response to saying we are reengaging in China with a different set of trade negotiations,” Hill said. Biden’s “not going to give away the chip, and, to give Donald Trump credit, he's the person that made the chip.”

Tying together Biden's trade policy and domestic priorities, Hill said Biden's infrastructure bill would be a boon to the steel industry at home.