

The empire strikes back: Joe Biden's plan to restore U.S. hegemony

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Army Chief of Staff General Mark Milley, Vice President Joe Biden, Major General Andrew P. Poppas, and Army Secretary Eric Fanning.

Joe Biden defeated Donald Trump to win the presidency in a contest almost entirely focused on domestic policy. Biden ran on overcoming the pandemic and restoring bourgeois “norms,” while Trump ran on keeping the economy open and stoking up white nationalist bigotry.

During all the debates about the election, the socialist Left had little to no serious discussion of the two candidates’ foreign policy. That Biden’s first act after securing victory was to announce nominees for his national security team has finally forced this conversation to the fore.

When introducing them, Biden declared, “America is back, ready to lead the world, not retreat from it. Once again sit at the head of the table. Ready to confront our adversaries and not reject our allies.” This declaration of imperial restoration jolted the Left to attention.

Many have denounced Biden’s militarist record, exposed his nominees’ defense industry ties, and criticized their hawkish positions. Some did so with naïve hopes of convincing Biden to adopt progressive positions on foreign policy. They will be severely disappointed.

A creature of the establishment, Biden is determined to ensure U.S. dominance in the changing balance of state power in global capitalism. He made clear his administration will “not be a third Obama term because ... we face a totally different world than we faced in the Obama-Biden

administration.”

He is therefore proposing a new imperial strategy that combines features of Obama’s muscular multilateralism (apparently an evolution from John Kerry’s 2004 celebration of the Democratic Party’s “tradition of muscular internationalism”) with Trump’s focus on great power rivalry with China and Russia. This augurs not the peace that liberals hoped for, but a dangerous reassertion of U.S. imperial power.

The strategic crisis of U.S. imperialism

Biden’s strategy is designed to overcome a crisis; the U.S. faces imperial and regional challengers for the first time since the end of the Cold War. In the 1990s, the U.S. was the world’s sole superpower and pursued a strategy of (neo)liberal hegemony over a unipolar world order.

Washington aimed to prevent the rise of any peer competitor or network of states that could rival its rule. It imposed neoliberalism through the IMF, World Bank, and the World Trade Organization (WTO), integrated the world’s states into political institutions like the UN, and used its military and NATO forces to police so-called rogue states and crisis-torn countries and regions.

Three developments precipitated the relative decline of U.S. imperial power. The neoliberal boom led to the rise of new economic powers, most importantly China, which now rivals the U.S. and its multinationals.

Washington’s failed “forever wars” in Afghanistan and Iraq undermined Washington’s ability to police the world. Finally, the Great Recession hammered the U.S. and its allies, while China and its tributaries continued to boom.

These three developments have birthed a new asymmetric multipolar world order. While still the dominant imperial power, Washington now faces a host of rivals, cannot rule in the old way, and must come up with a new strategy.

Obama tried to refurbish the old (neo)liberal strategy by reviving the U.S. economy, on-shoring U.S. manufacturing, extracting the U.S. from its occupations in the Middle East, and carrying out a Pivot to Asia to contain China.

Obama had little success on any front. His stimulus of the economy dragged it out of a recession but produced a weak recovery. Crises in the Middle East, especially the rise of ISIS, bogged the U.S. down in a new war in Iraq and Syria, all while the “old war” in Afghanistan continued, blocking Obama’s plans for a redeployment of the U.S. military to Asia. And growing hostility to neoliberal trade pacts in both capitalist parties doomed his Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPP).

Trump’s MAGA nationalism accelerates decline

Trump abandoned efforts towards multilateral (neo)liberal hegemony, promising to “Make America Great Again” by putting “America First.” His new strategy—Illiberal Hegemony—aimed to rebuild U.S. power on a white nationalist basis.

Trump laid out the four key initiatives he pursued in his National Security Strategy. First, he shored up so-called domestic security by escalating the bipartisan war on immigrants, implementing the Muslim Ban, and greenlighting law and order policing. Second, in hopes of strengthening the U.S. economy, he paired protectionist tariffs against foreign competition, particularly from China, with a domestic neoliberal program of tax cuts and deregulation.

Third, he reoriented military strategy away from the so-called War on Terror to great power competition with China and Russia. Finally, he abandoned multilateralism for a transactional approach to both allies and antagonists.

Instead of “Making America Great Again,” Trump accelerated Washington’s relative decline: his racism compromised Washington’s projection of itself as a democratic model; his economic policies fueled a stock market bubble but not a new boom in the real economy; Covid-19 triggered a deep recession only made worse by Trump’s catastrophic mismanagement of the pandemic; his policies in the Middle East spurred greater conflict with Iran without containing its rise; his confrontation with China drove Beijing to become only more assertive; and his transactional approach to international relationships alienated Washington’s historic allies.

A couple of Obama administration apparatchiks summarized the disastrous results: “the Trump saga has projected an image of the United States as demanding of others and unsure of itself, bullying, yet unreliable. The result has been to embolden China, distress Europe and leave all American allies and foes wondering about the durability of our commitments and the credibility of our threats.”

“America is Back” - Biden’s plan for imperial restoration

That is why the majority of U.S. capital—especially its most globalized sections like high tech— as well as civil servants, the Pentagon brass, CIA, State Department, and Republicans who previously served in the national security apparatus, all supported Biden in the election. They want him to restore Washington’s supremacy as well as capitalist growth and competitiveness.

Biden laid out the broad outlines of his strategy in an article entitled “Why America Must Lead,” and Hillary Clinton refined it in another, “A National Security Reckoning,” both in Foreign Affairs, the journal of Washington’s “Imperial Brain Trust.”

Whatever their past disagreements, they are now preaching the same gospel. Clinton dubs their strategy’s key elements, “The Four D’s:” domestic renewal, development, defense, and diplomacy.

To accomplish domestic renewal, Biden and Clinton argue the U.S. must bring the pandemic under control by putting the CDC back in charge, coordinating private and public initiatives with the states, and organizing the distribution of the vaccine. They also contend that Washington must shed Trump’s racist and xenophobic rhetoric and reverse his extreme policies like the Muslim Ban and repeal of DACA and restore liberal democratic norms.

Of course, under Obama, those norms covered up mass deportation, surveillance, and policing of oppressed groups. But, shorn of open bigotry, the U.S. can again claim to stand for democratic rights and weaponize that as part of their soft power to lure states into their orbit against China and Russia.

To develop the U.S. economy, Biden proposes adopting an industrial policy he calls “Build Back Better.” He wants to increase federal spending in research and development (R&D) from its current level of 0.7 percent of GDP to 4 percent by 2030 to ensure U.S. supremacy over China in science and technology, especially in 5G.

He argues that the U.S. must bankroll U.S. “national champions” to rival China’s corporations like Huawei. He wants those champions to onshore production, abide by new “Buy American” stipulations, and base their supply chains outside of China, and within the orbit of U.S. allies and vassals.

Based on that high tech development, Biden intends to restructure the defense industry and U.S.

military. He plans a dramatic upgrade of high tech weapons designed to counter China's modernized military and fend off cyberwarfare from other states like Russia, as well as non-state actors.

Clinton argues that the U.S. should close unneeded bases, terminate outmoded weapons programs, and replace them with new high tech plants to produce weapons for 21st century warfare. She promises that such "public investments in advanced manufacturing, clean energy, and R&D could create good jobs and help the United States outcompete China."

Finally, Biden wants to revitalize diplomacy by rebuilding and expanding the State Department, which the Trump administration starved and sidelined. He plans to use that bolstered diplomatic core to reclaim Washington's leadership over multilateral institutions like the WTO, pacts like the Paris Climate Accords, and military alliances like NATO.

The goal of this muscular multilateralism is not benign. Biden intends to use it for great power competition, building what his nominee for Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, calls a "league of democracies" to discipline and contain China, Russia, and regional powers like Iran.

Stabilizing the Middle East

In order to focus on these rivalries, Biden must continue Trump's draw-down of U.S. troops from Afghanistan and Iraq. In place of those occupations, he plans to implement a counter-terrorist strategy, escalating the Drone War to assassinate al Qaeda and ISIS leaders and bomb their operating facilities.

Biden will attempt to contain Saudi Arabia and Israel's metastasizing conflict with Iran, Syria, Lebanon's Hezbollah, and Yemen's Houthi rebels. While he promises to adopt a more critical stance toward Tel Aviv and Riyadh and restrain some of their extreme policies, he sees both as indispensable, strategic allies.

Whatever fault he finds with Israel's policies, Biden intends to uphold an "ironclad commitment" to its security. The new administration will continue to bankroll the regime, repudiate the movement for Boycott Divestment and Sanctions (BDS), sustain Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital city, keep the U.S. embassy there, and ratify the peace accords Israel has struck with the Gulf States as well as its continuing rapprochement with Saudi Arabia.

At the same time, he has pledged to restore funding to the Palestinian Authority. But his advisers have stated that the so-called peace process is not a top priority for the administration and the time is not right to open negotiations for a two-state solution.

And while Biden may criticize Israeli seizure of Palestinian land, Obama administration negotiator Martin Indyk said, "I don't think he's going to want to have a fight over settlements." Establishment Zionism is thus returning to the White House.

Biden has adopted a sterner posture toward Saudi Arabia. He opposes its horrific war on Yemen, has considered ending sales of offensive weapons, but continues to support it based on shared strategic priorities, namely an alliance against Iran.

With Washington's mad dogs back on the leash, Biden plans to open new negotiations with Iran to reinstate the Nuclear Accord, which Trump abandoned. He is promising to drop sanctions in return for Tehran cutting back its nuclear program.

China. China. China.

If Biden can draw down the “forever wars” and contain the conflict with Iran, and that is a big “if,” he hopes to refocus Washington on great power competition. His administration’s priorities are, in the words of one of his advisers, “China. China. China. Russia.”

As this mantra makes clear, Biden’s top priority is China, which he calls Washington’s main strategic competitor, just as George W. Bush did. While Biden opposes Trump’s Cold War rhetoric, he is determined to put China in its place.

Biden called Chinese President Xi Jinping a “thug” during one of his debates with Trump. In Foreign Affairs, he declared,

The United States does need to get tough with China. If China has its way, it will keep robbing the United States and American companies of their technology and intellectual property. It will also keep using subsidies to give its state-owned enterprises an unfair advantage—and a leg up on dominating the technologies and industries of the future.



Unlike Trump, who attempted to bully China unilaterally, Biden plans to force it to obey Washington’s dictates. He has already called for a summit of allies that would include European powers, its Five Eyes (Britain, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, along with the U.S.), Japan, and India.

Biden hopes, in the words of his advisers, to construct “a coalition of allies to design and create new rules and institutions for trade, technology, and investment that level the playing field and erode Beijing’s ability to profit from anticompetitive practices.”

At the same time, Biden intends to collaborate with China on areas of supposedly shared interests such as climate change, pandemics, and arms control. Thus, for example, he hopes to get China to pressure North Korea to abandon its missile program in return for ending the sanctions regime that has strangled the country.

But Biden is under no illusion that engagement will diminish the fact of rivalry. He, therefore, is planning an economic, diplomatic, and military offensive to bolster Washington’s position in Asia. Biden is likely to maintain the Trump tariffs on China at least for the short term. And he is interested in restarting talks on the TPP to outflank China’s recently inked Regional Comprehensive Economic

Partnership.

Biden is already resuming Obama's push to lock in ties with Asian allies. He has reached out to Australia, Japan, South Korea, India, and Taiwan to assure them that the U.S. will support them in conflicts with China.

Biden promises to use human rights as a cudgel against China and its horrific policies in Hong Kong, Xinjiang, and Tibet. He will do so not out of any commitment to those people or their struggles, but to reassert the U.S. as the "leader of the free world" and to pull states, movements, and their activists into Washington's orbit.

Military flashpoints in Asia

Biden plans to back up these diplomatic and economic initiatives with military force. He already has promised such support for Japan in the event of a conflict with China over rival claims to islands Tokyo calls the Senkaku Islands and Beijing the Diaoyu Islands.

Biden holds an equally hard line in support of Taiwan against China, which regards the island state as a renegade province that must be reintegrated by force if necessary. Biden has vowed to pursue the same policy that past administrations have—strategic ambiguity.

At least rhetorically, Biden supports the One China Policy that recognizes Beijing as the only Chinese government. But he will continue arming Taiwan to deter China's ambitions to seize the country, risking a spiraling arms race and potential war in the process.

Biden has similarly staked out a belligerent posture against Beijing in the South China Sea. China has seized islands there claimed by various other Asian states to establish military bases, project control over key international shipping lanes, and lay claim to fisheries and undersea natural energy reserves.

In response, Obama and then Trump deployed the U.S. Navy and Air Force to assert U.S. hegemony over the area. During the election, Biden boasted that he had told Xi that the U.S. would defy their claims and continue missions in the South China Sea, in the words of the Democratic Party Platform, to deter "Chinese military intimidation."

Russia.

Biden's second target for great power competition is Russia. While Trump vacillated between admiring and sanctioning Putin's regime, The New York Times notes the Democrats "have become the party of Russia hawks."

Biden called Putin's regime an "opponent" during the election. He is determined to discipline Russia and at the same time entice it out of its emerging alliance with China, which if achieved would combine the forces of Putin's nuclear-armed petro-state with China's massive economic might.

Putin took advantage of Trump's ambivalence to further project Russia's power into Eastern Europe and the Middle East. And, of course, it continues cyber attacks on elections in the U.S. and other states. That's why Biden, in a moment of dramatic exaggeration, called Russia "the greatest international threat to the U.S."

Biden intends to use NATO to bully Russia in Eastern Europe and challenge its alliances in the Middle East with Iran and Syria. He has pledged to increase sanctions on the Kremlin to punish it for seizing Crimea, supporting the breakaway sections of Ukraine, and carrying out cyber attacks on

the U.S.

At the same time, Biden promises diplomatic engagement with Putin to pull him away from Beijing. For example, he wants to relaunch negotiations for the New Start Treaty to place limits on nuclear missiles.

The Biden administration hopes “to use the suspicions that Moscow and Beijing have of each other to split the two superpowers — just as President Richard M. Nixon used it, in reverse, to win his opening with China nearly 50 years ago.” However we assess the likely success of such efforts, the maintenance of imperial hegemony remains the goal.

Socialist tasks amidst growing inter-imperial rivalry

Biden’s new strategy thus augurs an aggressive and interventionist foreign policy. As Forbes Magazine senior contributor Loren Thompson concluded, “A Biden presidency thus would be more likely to use U.S. military forces overseas than President Trump has been.”

While the U.S. rivalry with China will heat up, there are countervailing tendencies that will put brakes on it becoming open warfare. The deep integration of the two economies persists, making any open conflict a risk to both states. Moreover, any conflict could trigger a nuclear war, a risk neither wants to take.

As a result, the rivalry will mainly be expressed in economic and diplomatic competition as well as proxy conflicts. But there are any number of disputes, especially those over Taiwan and the South China Sea, that could trigger military conflicts even if both states would prefer to avoid them.

Moreover, the nationalism each state has whipped up will make it very difficult for either to climb down in a confrontation. And there are hawkish Republicans in the U.S. and the so-called “Wolf Warriors” in China itching for a fight.

Therefore, it is essential that the new socialist movement, and the Democratic Socialists of America in particular, stake out a clear, principled anti-imperialist position. We must oppose the Biden administration’s reassertion of U.S. imperialism.

In particular, we must not fall for Biden’s attempt to marry a domestic jobs program in high tech with restructuring the U.S. military to confront China. Instead, we should call for massive cuts to the military-industrial complex and use the saved money to fund jobs and a Green New Deal.

While we oppose U.S. imperialism, we must not lend support to its rivals, especially China or Russia, which while weaker imperialist powers are no less predatory, exploitative, and oppressive. Our solidarity should instead be with workers and oppressed people, in all nations and imperial spheres of influence, in their fight for liberation from below.

We should support progressive and socialist forces in those struggles. Only by welding together our global fight for democracy, equality, and socialism can the workers and oppressed win a new world that puts people and the environment first.

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