

[U.S. FOREIGN POLICY](#)

Joe Biden's foreign policy: A year in review

The president's handling of the war in Ukraine has largely been the sole bright spot in an otherwise status quo oriented U.S. posture.

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Written by [Daniel Larison](#)

There have been relatively few foreign policy successes for the United States over the last 12 months, and 2023 looks to be a year plagued by more avoidable crises.

As the Biden administration approaches the halfway mark of the president's term, U.S. foreign policy has been marked by increasing militarization, the entrenchment of bad client state relationships, and an increase of U.S. security commitments when the United States was already overstretched.

The Biden administration deserves credit for its alliance management and organizing military assistance for Ukraine following Russia's illegal invasion in February. U.S. and allied support for Ukraine helped to halt Russian advances and drive their occupying forces out from several of the territories that they had seized. While the administration has responded capably to the war in Ukraine, that has come at the expense of distracting it from other important issues that have required more attention from Washington.

Failed sanctions policies remain firmly in place and have gone mostly unchanged since Biden took office. Biden inherited almost all the broad sanctions that Washington is imposing around the world, but with few exceptions he has either left them untouched or added to them. A slight easing of Venezuela sanctions at the tail end of this year stands out as an isolated example of the administration's willingness to show some flexibility in how the United States wages its many economic wars.

In every other case, however, the administration has shown no interest in providing sanctions relief. These holdover "maximum pressure" campaigns have not only failed to achieve any of the goals their advocates set for them, but they have also backfired by

provoking more of the activities that they were supposed to discourage.

There are serious problems brewing with Iran and North Korea that might still be headed off with more creative diplomacy, but that seems unlikely to happen. North Korea policy remains stuck in the past as U.S. officials recite mantras about denuclearization that have become increasingly fanciful. Many arms control and Korea experts now [recognize](#) that the current policy cannot succeed on its own terms and must [change](#) if negotiations are to have any chance at making progress, but this criticism seems to have made the administration [cling](#) to the existing policy even more.

Insisting on a maximalist goal of denuclearization in the face of a growing and increasingly sophisticated North Korean nuclear arsenal makes no sense, and it could set the stage for a new crisis on the Korean Peninsula in the coming year.

Negotiations with Iran have been stalled for much of this year, and now they are all but moribund. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action is on its last legs, and if it survives through the next year it will likely be in name only. The Iranian government shares in the blame for the failure of these talks, but the Biden administration could have moved to rejoin the agreement earlier than it did and it should have shown greater flexibility on sanctions relief on account of the previous administration's violations of the agreement.

The fact that the United States still isn't a party to the JCPOA in December 2022 is itself an indictment of the administration's mishandling of the issue. If the nuclear deal cannot be salvaged, there will be tremendous pressure on the administration from regional client governments and from many members to Congress to launch an illegal attack on Iran. At best, there would be more regional instability and increased risks for U.S. military personnel in a post-JCPOA Middle East, and at worst the United States could be blundering its way into another avoidable war in the region.

Despite promises of "consequences" for Saudi Arabia and accountability for the crimes committed on the orders of the crown prince Mohammed bin Salman, the Biden administration has effectively shielded both the kingdom and the crown prince from both. There are reportedly [no plans](#) for Washington to take any action in response to the OPEC+ production cut, and once again Biden has shown that his threats to make changes to the relationship with Saudi Arabia are empty ones that Riyadh can easily brush off.

The Biden administration has also protected the crown prince from any legal liability he might face in U.S. courts by asserting that he has immunity on account of his formal appointment as prime minister. As it happened, the administration delayed and [dragged its feet](#) on its determination in this matter until the appointment had taken place so that they could claim that their hands were tied.

Many observers applaud the Biden administration's record in Europe because of its role in unifying NATO and rallying support behind Ukraine, but this has come at the cost of discouraging European allies from doing more for their own security and deepening European dependence on the United States.

The latest round of NATO expansion to bring in Finland and Sweden was an unnecessary increase of U.S. commitments in Europe when it already has too many around the world. The current increased U.S. military presence in Europe is unwarranted, and it encourages more free-riding from allies that have ample means to protect themselves. Because the United States rushes to take up the burden, European allies know that they will never be expected to increase their share of it, and that locks Washington into over-investment of scarce resources when other governments could do far more to take responsibility for their own defense.

Relations with both major Eurasian powers have worsened significantly in just the last year, and there is now a greater risk of direct conflict with nuclear-armed states than there has been at any time since the end of the Cold War. It should still be possible for the United States to manage these relationships effectively and avoid a great power war, but Washington is drawing closer to collisions with both Russia and China at a time when the last remnants of the arms control architecture are [collapsing around us](#). The prospects of negotiating a follow-up treaty to replace New START are dimmer than ever, and in just a few years there may be no treaties limiting the size and deployment of the world's largest arsenals.

The Biden administration continues to say the right things about wanting to avoid conflict and a new cold war with China, but then it goes out of its way to antagonize China with export controls and the president's unwise public pledges to defend Taiwan.

The president's recent meeting with Xi Jinping in Indonesia helped to halt a further slide in relations, but this was mostly an exercise in cleaning up the debris from House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's ill-advised visit to Taiwan over the summer. There has been a temporary pause in the ratcheting up of tensions, but the current direction of U.S. China policy practically guarantees that it will resume in the second half of Biden's term.

The Biden administration has not had much success this year because it is still too wedded to status quo policies that haven't advanced U.S. interests. If it would like to see better results in 2023, it will need to break with current policy on at least a few of these issues.