Two cheers for Biden's national security record

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OCTOBER 6, 2022

Almost two years into the presidency, U.S. President Joe Biden's hopes that his lifetime of foreign policy experience would be a major asset in his presidency have been dashed. Domestic economic and political woes weigh more. While a surprisingly good start in early 2021, his popularity has since fallen and has overall been not very badly received, remaining around 43 percent or less ever since. The fractured Afghanistan withdrawal, and a growing sense of instability that took the shape of his surprisingly poor first year COVID-19 performance, inflation woes, and the Ukraine war have since taken a further toll. Most of the latter developments, he could not fully foresee, but his foreseeing was remarkable in anticipation of the Russian invasion, whether he or others

Twenty months into the Biden presidency, his team had not even released national security or national defense strategy documents – probably out of uncertainty about what to put in them and how ambitious and/or or many troubles. An interim national security strategy in early 2021 publicized several principles and goals, but it was not very specific. Biden's team has had to deal with a lot of unexpected and difficult domestic affairs, an emphasis on American middle class (translating in part into a reduction in such as traditional free markets agenda), and a focus on the new transnational threats like pandemic disease and climate change. Some of the administration's initiatives, such as the Build Back Better domestic agenda, have been stymied by Congress. Others, such as the Inflation Reduction Act, have been passed. Biden has also formed promising partnerships to test themselves and so far an integrated approach to the world. Moreover, some of these promises are not yet fulfilled, and with each other. The question is what can be successfully done on climate and pandemic disease while keeping China as an emergent adversary? And why is China the main problem it is Russia that is violently challenging the global order more than China is, at least for now?

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However, despite these mistakes and the inchoate grand strategy, Biden's national security record may not deserve three cheers, but it does merit two. The administration has made some important strides, which none that 30 percent typically give him an unfavorable assessment in recent polls. The reason is this: the country is still reasonably safe. That is the key metric by which a judge any administration's record. The administration has made some important initiatives to keep the country doing quite well in the world and to keep the world from becoming more unstable. Its immediate predecessor, who took the nation closer to the brink of war against North Korea or Iran than is commonly appreciated, and unlike certain prominent Republicans who have suggested the country consider recognizing Taiwan independence or heightened risk of war with China, Biden has not made any dangerous moves. Overall, the Biden administration has kept the national security record many had expected, but does not have a clear overall vision.

Consider some of the big challenges that Biden and team have tackled to date:

UKRAINE AND RUSSIA

On the Ukraine conflict, the Biden team's record is mostly good so far. Biden rightly decided that the United States should not fight a war with Russia over Ukraine, but should help Ukraine to fight back. It was important, in a sense, to restore credibility. But he quickly found a balance between a strong and emotionally important, yet limited, commitment to Ukraine, and a very direct fight between nuclear-armed superpowers that involves a major conflict in Ukraine. Some of the Biden team's key traits and a Western experience in the economic realm that has off-shoot high-tech cooperation between the West and Russia and China, as well as substantially reduced Russian oil and gas export earnings, of brought the country to bear.

In addition, Biden decided to provide massive security and economic assistance, and unprecedented intelligence support, to Ukraine in order to help Ukraine to prevent the war. Which of the only winning, Ukraine has received some 10,000 precision-strikes (rockets, Javelin and Stingers) from the United States and other countries, and Ukraine has received some 10,000 precision-strikes (rockets, Javelin and Stingers) from the United States and other countries, and Ukraine has received some 10,000 Russian tanks, armored vehicles, and thousands of artillery shells, communications equipment, counter-battery radars, support vehicles – all of around $10 billion in weapons from the United States alone, as well as considerable intelligence support from the United States and other countries. Ukraine has also

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Where Biden has gone wrong, it is worth trying to understand why. Only with such an understanding can the administration perhaps rethink some of its existing practices and methods, and the rest of us try to apply political and intellectual pressure to encourage a shift in approach. Biden should keep his "resolute restraint" — being firm on defending allies and core interests without looking for war or succumbing to escalatory pressures when crises arise. His desire to avoid escalation and war during crisis is commendable. He should, however, be more strategic on some key issues, carefully weighing costs and risks while prioritizing big issues over smaller ones, and perhaps not trusting his instincts quite so much, as he may have done to a fault on Afghanistan, North Korea, NATO expansion, and even aspects of COVID response.

The Biden national security team appears to do well at the classic Democratic Party thing: understanding, considering, and ultimately reflecting the views of a wide array of interest groups. There's a seat at the table for democracy promoters, human rights champions, American-middle-class advocates, alliance repairmen, and other multilateralists/globalists, domestic politics specialists, China bashers, NATO expanders, defense hawks, defense moderates, regional experts, and grand strategists. Not to mention those fixated on the 21st century transnational challenges: climate, cyber, pandemic disease. Not to mention experts on domestic politics and horse trading.

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For the most part this is as it should be. But sometimes policy seems designed primarily to satisfy just one or two of these concerns or groups — and grand strategy takes a back seat. Every foreign policy team has its strengths and weaknesses, of course. In Biden's case, he built a team of individuals with high integrity, excellent work ethics, and considerable intelligence. But it is probably fair to say that he did not build a team of rivals made up of strong-willed individuals with their own powerful views on strategy. As such, there is a risk that policy process triumphs over robust debate in the Situation Room, and that sometimes a decision is based either on Biden's instincts or on the particular druthers of a given interest group. In short, the administration still needs to be more strategic — more reflective about how different priorities affect each other.

A good specific example is continuing to call the Chinese treatment of the Uyghurs genocide, (reiterating what Pompeo said in late 2020). That is a hugely loaded and incendiary term and not correct except in the most technocratic legal sense. It adds insult to injury at a time when we cannot afford needless provocation of China. To be sure, China's repression of the Uyghurs should be documented and penalized, and the recent U.N. report had the right tone on this. The problem in U.S. policy was in letting the lawyers and human rights purists and China bashers carry the day with the term genocide.

Another example is North Korea policy, where there seems to be no creativity in diplomacy, perhaps partly out of fear that attempting to talk to Kim would open the Biden team to political attack. The domestic political team and the nuclear nonproliferation purists seem to have won this one, again at the expense of broader and more holistic national interests.

A third example was the reckless reiteration of our goal of bringing Ukraine into NATO last November, when a U.S.-Ukraine strategic charter was signed. Most Americans didn't notice that document; Russian President Vladimir Putin surely did. I do not mean to blame the United States or Biden for the Ukraine war morally. But the bipartisan idea dating back to George W. Bush that Ukraine belonged in NATO someday was always flawed. On this one, we let an ideology of democracy promotion and alliance expansion lead us to unwise choices, dating back to 2008. And reiterating our goal so publicly and prominently in 2021 was unwise, especially since we had no real intent of acting on our words.

Still, the Biden record holds up reasonably well. The core job of any American president on the national security front is to keep the world as safe and stable as possible so that the nation will be secure. Biden deserves no Nobel Prizes yet for solving any of the key overseas challenges that make today's international environment very dangerous. And he has made plenty of mistakes. But focusing on the big picture and the fundamentals — especially China and Russia, especially defense policy and national economic and scientific strength — it has not been a bad first two years so far.

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Acknowledgments

Editorial: Alex Dimsdale

Web layout: Rachel Slattery

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