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Opinion | Biden's unsentimental foreign policy strategy

By David Ignatius
Columnist + Follow

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President Biden and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky in the Oval Office on Dec. 21. (Demetrius Freeman/The Washington Post)

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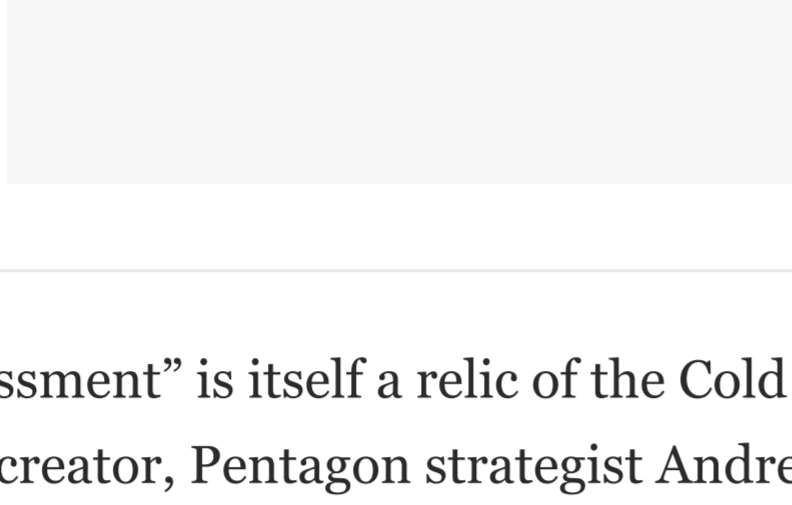
Heading into the new year, I asked national security adviser Jake Sullivan for a “net assessment” of where the Biden administration stands on foreign policy. Sullivan’s report card, not surprisingly, was positive. He thinks Biden is achieving the basic goals he set when he took office in 2021.

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The intriguing part of Sullivan’s answer was how he described the new template for policy — a world in which the post-1945 global structure is changing fast. What matters now is fluidity and adaptability, as the United States seeks to work with amorphous “middle powers” in addition to traditional treaty allies.

[George F. Will: How Russia's invasion of Ukraine altered the world in 2022]

“The old Cold War construct of blocs is not coherent,” Sullivan argued. “Countries don’t want to choose, and we don’t want them to. Rather than trying to divide the world, we are seeking an affirmative agenda — infrastructure, climate, food security and digital rules.”



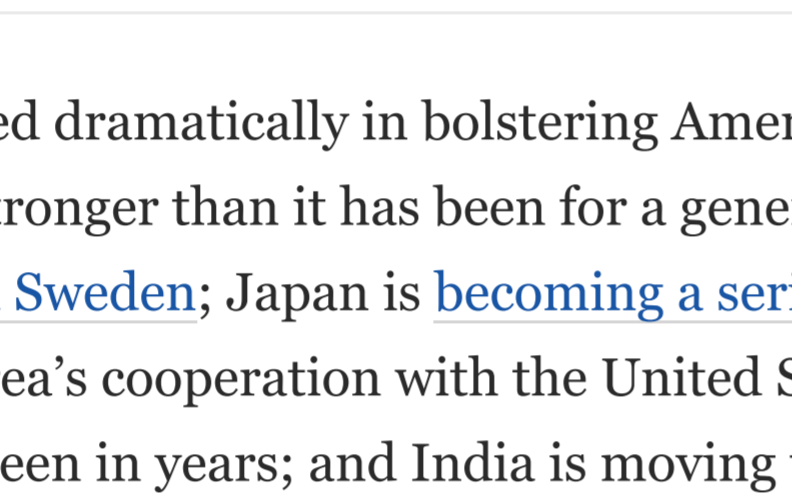
The term “net assessment” is itself a relic of the Cold War, but it’s still a useful tool. For its creator, Pentagon strategist Andrew Marshall, it was about weighing the Soviet-American strategic balance, “net” of each other’s offsetting strengths and weaknesses. Marshall would use this formula to calculate deterrence — and estimate what the balance might be after a nuclear exchange. This was the grim science of doomsday.

Today, net assessment is more about spotting trends and future prospects — and making an unblinkered assessment of the relative positions of the United States and its adversaries in what has become a genuinely multipolar world. “It’s 2022, not 2008,” Sullivan told me in late December. The corollary for national security advisers is that where the United States has less power to compel outcomes, it needs better strategy to achieve its ends.

Sullivan argues that Biden has achieved the three national security goals he initially set: rebuild the U.S. economy and rejuvenate the middle class; revive NATO and other global alliances; and withdraw U.S. troops from Afghanistan to focus on current threats, rather than the day after 9/11.

[Opinion: We sponsored Ukrainian refugees under a Biden program. The results were astonishing.]

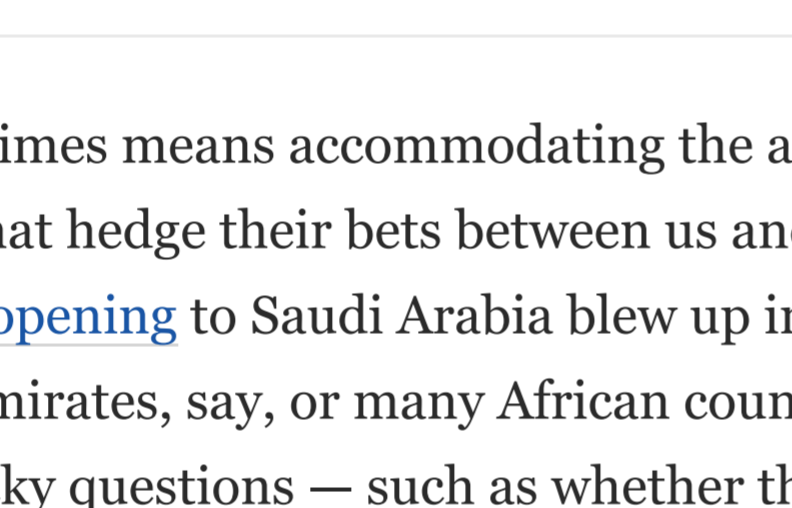
The economy is “significantly healthier and more competitive” now, Sullivan contends, thanks to bipartisan spending on infrastructure, semiconductors, electric vehicles and other advanced technologies. “We are building the economy of the 21st century,” he said. Maybe so. But inflation, triggered at least in part by Biden’s 2021 spending spree, blew away the price stability that had lasted for a generation, and the middle class is still treading water.



Biden has succeeded dramatically in bolstering American partnerships abroad. NATO is stronger than it has been for a generation and is about to add Finland and Sweden; Japan is becoming a serious defense partner; South Korea’s cooperation with the United States and Japan is better than it has been in years; and India is moving toward a strategic partnership through the Quad (the United States, Japan and Australia).

Biden’s final goal, withdrawing from Afghanistan, started off as a strategic disaster. But the dire forecasts about what would follow have mostly proven wrong. A miserable, misogynistic Taliban regime runs the country, but the world looks the other way — and there hasn’t been a massive outflow of refugees or a new spasm of terrorism. Indeed, al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri has been killed. It’s also easier now for the United States to support Ukraine. “If we were still fighting in Afghanistan,” Sullivan noted, “it would be a very juicy target for the Russians.”

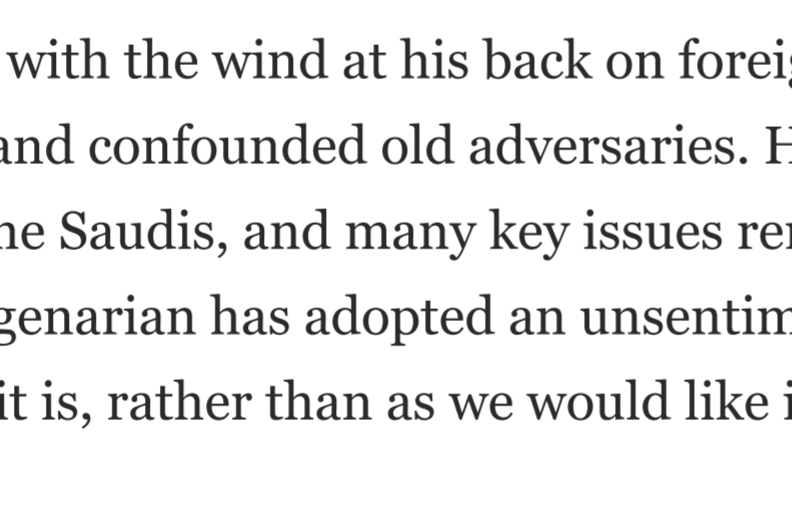
Biden’s foreign policy pragmatism often goes unremarked, but this administration shows strikingly little interest in the idealists’ perennial dream of remaking the world in our image. To stem Latin America, where the CIA waged covert wars for three decades to take leftist influence. Today, nearly all the region’s major countries are leftist-led. “We have to take Latin America as we find it,” Sullivan argued, and “maintain effective constructive relations.”



Pragmatism sometimes means accommodating the authoritarian “middle powers” that hedge their bets between us and a rising China. Biden’s fist-bump opening to Saudi Arabia blew up in his face. But with the United Arab Emirates, say, or many African countries, Biden seems willing to leave tricky questions — such as whether those nations will deepen ties with China — in suspended animation.

Biden wins high marks on Ukraine, from me at least, for providing military support to help repel Russia’s invasion without triggering World War III. Biden doesn’t have an honorable end game yet for Ukraine. But I’m betting that through steadfast support for Kyiv, he and the Ukrainians will find one by the end of 2023.

“The president is not out looking for a fight,” Sullivan says. “But as [Vladimir] Putin is finding out, he will not back down to bullies and will help free people when they are under attack.”



The crouching tiger on the global landscape is China. Here, Biden has been helped not so much by his success as his adversary’s mistakes. When Biden took office, policymakers seemed convinced Beijing’s rise was inevitable. That sense has eroded, thanks largely to the failure of President Xi Jinping’s “zero covid” policy and rapid slowing of the Chinese economy.

Biden begins 2023 with the wind at his back on foreign policy. He has made new friends and confounded old adversaries. He has made mistakes, as with the Saudis, and many key issues remain unfinished, but the genial octogenarian has adopted an unsentimental foreign policy — for the world as it is, rather than as we would like it to be.

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