

Making America Miserable Again

Biden's foreign policy risks repeating Obama's errors

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The election of Joe Biden as the forty-sixth president of the United States will see a reversion to Washington's default liberal, progressive values in foreign policy, a revival of the Wilsonian, rules-based international order that the Obama, Bush and Clinton presidencies embraced, and the liberal academic establishment advanced during the Trump interregnum.

Shortly after the election, Biden declared that 'America is back' and will re-assume its seat at 'the head of the international table'. Linda Thomas-Greenfield, Biden's nominee for Ambassador to the United Nations, asserted that not only was America back but so too was multilateralism. Henceforth no problem would be 'irresolvable' with America once more 'leading the way'.

Whatever else the new administration may do in its first hundred days, Biden, a former chair of the senate foreign relations committee, plans to reverse Trump's America First approach to foreign policy that eschewed international institutions that no longer served American interests. Shortly after Trump's electoral defeat, Harvard's foreign policy eminence grise, Joseph Nye, called for the new administration to 'rediscover the importance of international organisations' and revive its fading 'soft power of attraction'.

Shortly after, Biden announced that America would re-enter the Paris climate change agreement that Trump had only recently left. The symbolism was clear. America would re-engage with the international organisations it had largely created during the 1990s, pursuing, as influential ivy league professor, John Ikenberry, prognosticated 'institution building' that locks states into 'desired policy orientations'. In making *A World Safe for Democracy*, Ikenberry sees America leading a resuscitated, rules-based order through multilateral cooperation. What might this mean for reviving US prestige as the indispensable global power?

Across the Atlantic, Biden will reverse Trump's dismissive treatment of NATO and contemptuous view of the EU, especially those he and his nominee for Secretary of State, the Paris-educated Tony Blinken most admire, Angela Merkel and Emmanuel Macron. Liberal institutionalists still see the

EU as central to a progressive, post-national, European regional order. Paradoxically, they ignore its democratic deficit and the EU's comprehensive investment agreement with China that gives the PRC unfettered access to the European market, endorsing its indifference to a rules-based international order.

By contrast, it views Brexit as a disturbing form of populism and considers Boris Johnson a racist 'shape-shifting creep'. The Democrats will adopt a punitive line if Brexit sees the UK government pursuing policies that abrogate treaty protocols with the EU covering the Irish border. Revived US commitment to international treaties and institutions, together with Biden's Irish catholic ancestry, will see Sinn Fein assuming a higher Washington profile than English Conservatives with their imperial baggage. The UK might quickly discover that its special relationship is special only in the sense of an intellectually challenged child and the relationship an essentially disciplinary one. The Slovaks, Poles and Hungarians can expect similar reprimands for their enthusiasm for conservative politicians who adopt unacceptably populist attitudes to immigration and diversity.

Moving East, Biden's team will follow a hard line on Russia and Syria, but also have little time for Erdogan's Ottoman Sunni expansionism. This policy reset might exacerbate tensions in an area Trump largely ignored. A revival of the Iran nuclear deal, the abandonment of which Biden considers 'a profound mistake', will give much needed oxygen to Iran's regional proxies in Palestine, Lebanon and Syria, further destabilising an already volatile region, as well as reviving a theocratic regime that, as a result of Trump's sanctions, was on the verge of collapse.

It is, however, in reviving Obama's multilateral pivot to Asia that the new dispensation will face the most profound challenge. Trump dumped Obama's Trans-Pacific Partnership which envisaged a multilateral trade deal with a variety of Asian and South American partners. Trumpian realism directly challenged China's growing regional hegemony and its manipulation and corruption of international institutions like the

UN, the WHO and WTO. It preferred bilateral to multilateral agreements, forged closer ties with Japan, Australia and India, courted regimes with questionable human rights records and illiberal governments in the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam, ignored regional arrangements like ASEAN and APEC and challenged China's hegemonic ambitions. As Xi Jinping acted with growing impunity in the South China Sea and across the McMahon line in North East India, as well as sanctioning Australia for questioning its conduct, Trump's secretary of state, Mike Pompeo, proposed an alliance of littoral states stretching across the Indo Pacific to contain China's burgeoning hard power.

The new Biden administration will also build alliances in the Indo-Pacific but one with a democratic bias which might further alienate South East Asian states that have always found US democracy promotion an unwarranted interference in their internal affairs. Even India, Asia's largest democracy might find that Kamala Harris is not quite the supportive 'chitty' the Hindu nationalist government in Delhi assumes. Meanwhile the Xi regime will relish the knowledge that Biden wants 'to work with China' on areas of common interest like climate change.

A renewed commitment to universal liberal values and resuming America's place at the head of an unstable multilateral table fails to recognise how the world's revisionist powers — China, Russia and Iran — dismiss such values as naive and easy to manipulate. Treating the world as it ought to be rather than as it is, offers the worrying prospect of a rerun of Obama's sanctimonious foreign policy that did so much to encourage the rise of Russia, Iran and an increasingly irridentist China in the first place.

Behind its tired, gerontocratic leadership, sits a more radical Democrat caucus eager to transform the international order along far more progressive lines. The woke wing of the party seeks to slash US military spending, disavow the US militarism responsible for wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and promote an emancipated utopia of social justice and human rights. It would open borders to immigration and seek the decolonisation of the west. It will be unsparingly critical, not of China, Iran and Russia, but of the UK and other European nations for their dark, colonial pasts. It will cherish the oppressed victims of capitalism everywhere and expose the myth of the US as a promised land as a perverse distortion of its unseemly beginnings in slavery and the conquest of native peoples.

The progressive orthodoxy in its various forms is back, enhanced by Trump's impeachment and a democrat majority in both houses. As Talleyrand observed of the restored Bourbon monarchy, it has learned nothing and forgotten nothing. Its virtuous, multilateral, social justice signalling might very quickly make America miserable again.