

King Joe and the Round Table: Biden's America in a Multipolar World

By [Medea Benjamin](#) and [Nicolas J. S. Davies](#)
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In an article in Foreign Affairs in March titled, "Why America Must Lead Again," Joe Biden claimed that "the world doesn't organize itself," and promised to "put the U.S. back at the head of the table" among the nations of the world. But the premise that the world can only organize itself under the direction of the United States and Biden's ambition to restore the U.S. to such a dominant position at this moment in history are out of touch with global reality.

This view is already being challenged by governments and social movements around the world, and Americans should also challenge it if we mean to avoid endless war and a debilitating new arms race. As if to underline precisely these dangers, the "Back at the head of the table" sub-heading in Biden's Foreign Affairs article appeared just above a huge photo of U.S. troops firing heavy artillery into a town in Afghanistan at the height of Obama's [escalation](#) of that war in June 2011 (above).

Biden's Record

An [in-depth report](#) in Defense One on June 30th, based on interviews with dozens of Biden insiders, explained how his article and his foreign policy views have reassured military-industrial interests that were worried by the impact of the growing progressive movement on the Democratic Party. Defense One concluded, "Biden may not radically change the nation's military, deviate from the era's so-called great power competition, or even slash the bottom line of the Pentagon's \$700 billion budget."

These conclusions are consistent with Joe Biden's record as a senator and vice president. On the most consequential, life-or-death decisions that members of Congress must make, votes for war or peace, Biden only once voted against a U.S.-led war, the First Gulf War in 1991. That was largely a party line vote, in which [45 out of 55](#) Democratic senators voted against the use of military force to recover Kuwait from Iraq for its royal family.

But Biden seems to have learned a perverse lesson from that war, since he later expressed [regret](#) for his vote and never voted against a war again. The next time Congress voted on a bill to authorize the use of military force, over Kosovo in 1999, Biden wrote the bill himself. His war bill failed in the House in a rare [213-213 tie](#), but the U.S. and NATO [attacked Yugoslavia](#) anyway, in a war that was therefore illegal under both U.S. and international law.

As the bombing campaign escalated, killing [thousands](#) of civilians and destroying civilian infrastructure from Kosovo to Belgrade, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan

warned that the U.S. and NATO's decision to go to war without UN Security Council approval had set the world "on a dangerous path to anarchy." [Joe Biden](#) responded, "Nobody in the Senate agrees with that. There is nothing to debate. He is dead, flat, unequivocally wrong."

Biden then played a key role in the [propaganda blitz](#) for war on Iraq. As John Feffer and Stephen Zunes [wrote later](#), "In his powerful position as chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, he orchestrated a propaganda show designed to sell the war to skeptical colleagues and the American public by ensuring that dissenting voices would not get a fair hearing."

During his final 12 years in the Senate, Joe Biden never once voted against a [military spending](#) bill. Then, as vice president, despite the illusion of Obama as a "peace president," which even fooled the Nobel [Peace Prize](#) Committee, Biden was a senior member of [an administration](#) that set a post-World War II record for military spending and dropped more bombs and missiles on more countries than Bush and Cheney did.

To Biden's credit though, he did oppose the 2011 regime change operation that plunged [Libya](#) into endless chaos. Biden also argued against sending more U.S. troops to Afghanistan, but what he supported instead was a [policy shift](#) from large-scale U.S. occupations to a greater reliance on bombing, shelling, and covert and proxy war, which Obama adopted and Trump has continued.

The continuing chaos caused by the U.S.'s wars in the Greater Middle East, the [guerrilla wars](#) now raging across much of Africa, and the rubble and [unmarked graves](#) of [Ramadi](#), [Kobane](#), [Mosul](#), [Raqqqa](#) and other cities in Iraq and Syria are a damning testimony to the cynicism of the Obama and Trump administrations' war policies. They have succeeded in reducing U.S. casualties and shifting America's wars off our TV and computer screens, but only at the cost of [hundreds of thousands](#) of largely uncounted civilian deaths.

The U.S. Can't Organize Itself, Much Less the World

People around the world must be scratching their heads over Biden's claim that "the world doesn't organize itself" and that it needs the U.S. to do it. The more pressing question right now is whether the U.S. can organize itself to deal with a [pandemic](#) that China, New Zealand, Vietnam, Germany, Cuba and other better-organized societies have already contained and nearly defeated, simply by prioritizing the health of their people over other interests for a relatively short period of time.

In the U.S., on the other hand, the pandemic was instantly [politicized](#), and exploited as a new opportunity for [corporate bailouts](#). U.S. leaders cavalierly treated the health of the public as a secondary concern to be [weighed against](#) the impact on the "economy," mainly a euphemism for corporate profits and stock prices, and their own political interests.

In June, months into the pandemic, the U.S. still had only [37,000](#) contact tracers, barely a third of the 100,000 minimum that public health experts said were needed. Former CDC director Tom Frieden pointed out in April that the U.S. would need [300,000](#) contact tracers if it was to match the scale of China's successful program in Wuhan. Now a surge in new cases in the U.S. in June has inevitably led to a tragic

ever-rising [death toll](#) in July, with no end in sight.

In reality, the main obstacle to the world organizing itself in recent years has been the very country that Joe Biden promotes as its savior: the United States. [Wikipedia](#) lists 47 multilateral treaties that the U.S. has either not signed, signed but not ratified or withdrawn from. They range from the Convention on the Rights of the Child to the Convention on Cluster Munitions to the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. Wikipedia's list does not even include Trump's disastrous decision to pull out of the Nuclear Agreement with Iran or his withdrawal from the World Health Organization in the midst of a pandemic.

U.S. leaders blame their abysmal record of international obstruction on U.S. partisan politics, but other countries also have contentious domestic politics and yet somehow manage to ratify treaties, cooperate with the UN and play their part in international affairs. Only the U.S. acts like a spoiled child, demanding a seat at the head of the table before it will cooperate on anything – and then still refuses to cooperate.

On [climate change](#), the Obama administration wrecked the second phase of the Kyoto Protocol, which would have imposed binding limits on carbon emissions, refusing to sign on unless it was dropped in favor of a system in which each country would set its own voluntary, non-binding targets for emissions cuts. That was the basis for the much-hailed but ineffective agreements in Copenhagen and Paris that have allowed the U.S. to boost its [oil](#) and [gas](#) production to their highest levels ever.

On questions of war and peace, the [UN Charter](#) unequivocally prohibits the threat or use of force by any country, as Kofi Annan [pointed out](#) in the cases of Kosovo and Iraq. The basis of current U.S. war policy, as Biden implied in dismissing Annan's statement on Kosovo, is that the U.S. will not be bound by the UN Charter when its "vital interests" are at stake or it can find any political justification for war that is persuasive to U.S. leaders.

In effect, the U.S. claims to be exempt from the rule of international law, which is why it vigorously rejects the jurisdiction of impartial international courts that could never uphold such a claim. In the case of [Nicaragua v the United States](#) in the 1980s, the International Court of Justice found the U.S. guilty of aggression against Nicaragua and ordered the U.S. to cease its aggression and pay war reparations – which it has still not paid.

In economic terms, no single country dominates today's world economy or international trade as the U.S. did after the Second World War. The United States, China and the European Union are roughly equal in the size of their economies and their international trade, but even the combined [GDP](#) and [external trade](#) figures for all three only account for about 45% of the world's trade and economic activity. The world we live in today is a diverse, multipolar world of 196 countries, where billions of people live, work and interact with each other, and all deserve a voice in our common future.

The notion that the United States deserves a special seat at the head of the international table is therefore a dangerous anachronism. It is not based on the U.S.'s economic role in today's world but on weaponizing the residual power of the U.S. Treasury and the dollar with [murderous sanctions](#), and on a military imbalance that

has given its leaders the erroneous idea that they can ignore the laws the world has agreed to live by and instead adhere to a doctrine of “might makes right” or the “law of the jungle.”

Far from earning the U.S. a position of privilege and authority among nations, the U.S.’s illegal military and economic warfare is a serious problem that the American people and the world must address and peacefully resolve before it does even greater harm.

How About a Round Table?

Amid all the rancor of U.S. politics, many of the older Americans who are Joe Biden’s base in the Democratic Party wistfully remember President Kennedy and the much mythologized “brief shining moment” when a young, glamorous president turned the White House into a vision of [Camelot](#), and all things seemed possible. The most powerful symbol of the original Camelot was King Arthur’s Round Table, at which he and all his knights and guests sat as equals, and the identification of Kennedy with King Arthur was a symbol of his popular image as a man of the people – despite his privileged background.

So, here’s an idea for Joe Biden and his foreign policy advisers. Stop pretending that all America’s problems began with Trump, and that our failed bid for global military dominance has somehow earned our next president a “seat at the head of the table” when he sits down with his counterparts from China, Germany, Russia and the rest of the world. How about instead sitting down with them at a Round Table—real, virtual or just symbolic—on a basis of mutual respect and [sovereign equality](#), to solve the urgent problems we all face in this century?

The American people are ready to turn the page on 20 years of war, undying hostility to our old Cold War enemies and massive military budgets that leave us trailing our more peaceful neighbors in education, healthcare, public transport, housing and social programs. Instead of trying to match Trump’s hostility to China, which will only encourage him to double down on his brinkmanship, Biden should firmly close the book on Trump’s New Cold War before it gets even more perilous.

Unfortunately, Biden’s past loyalty to military-industrial interests does not bode well for the kind of leadership we need, and which we have not seen from any U.S. president of this generation. So if Biden is elected, it will be up to peace-loving Americans to demand a foreign policy that takes illegal military “options,” brutal sanctions and a new arms race off the table and replaces them with a new commitment to the rule of law and “Round Table” diplomacy.

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Medea Benjamin is cofounder of [CODEPINK for Peace](#), and author of several books, including [Inside Iran: The Real History and Politics of the Islamic Republic of Iran](#).

Nicolas J. S. Davies is an independent journalist, a researcher with CODEPINK and the author of [Blood On Our Hands: the American Invasion and Destruction of Iraq](#).

Featured image: A U.S. Air Force loadmaster assigned to the 746th Expeditionary Airlift Squadron performs a preflight inspection on a C-130 Hercules at Baghdad International Airport, Iraq, Dec. 9, 2019. The 746th EAS maintains a constant presence in the U.S. Central Command area of responsibility, supporting U.S. and Coalition aircraft in various operations in countries such as Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan. (U.S. Air Force photo by Staff Sgt. Bethany E. La Ville)

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Articles by: [Medea Benjamin](#)
and [Nicolas J. S. Davies](#)

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