

Ten Problems with Biden's Foreign Policy - And One Solution

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The Biden presidency is still in its early days, but it's not too early to point to areas in the foreign policy realm where we, as progressives, have been disappointed-or even infuriated.

There are one or two positive developments, such as the renewal of Obama's New START Treaty with Russia and Secretary of State Blinken's [initiative](#) for a UN-led peace process in Afghanistan, where the United States is finally turning to peace as a last resort, after 20 years lost in the [graveyard of empires](#).

By and large though, Biden's foreign policy already seems stuck in the militarist quagmire of the past twenty years, a far cry from his campaign promise to reinvigorate diplomacy as the primary tool of U.S. foreign policy.

In this respect, Biden is following in the footsteps of [Obama](#) and [Trump](#), who both promised fresh approaches to foreign policy but for the most part delivered more endless war.

By the end of his second term, Obama did have two significant diplomatic achievements with the signing of the Iran nuclear deal and normalization of relations with Cuba. So progressive Americans who voted for Biden had some grounds to hope that his experience as Obama's vice-president would lead him to quickly restore and build on Obama's achievements with Iran and Cuba as a foundation for the broader diplomacy he promised.

Instead, the Biden administration seems firmly entrenched behind the walls of hostility Trump built between America and our neighbors, from his renewed Cold War against China and Russia to his brutal sanctions against Cuba, Iran, Venezuela, Syria and dozens of countries around the world, and there is still no word on cuts to a [military budget](#) that has grown by 15% since FY2015 (inflation-adjusted).

Despite endless Democratic condemnations of Trump, Biden's foreign policy so far shows no substantive change from the policies of the past four years. Here are ten of the lowlights:

1. Failing to quickly rejoin the Iran nuclear agreement. The Biden administration's failure to immediately [rejoin the JCPOA](#), as Bernie Sanders promised to do on his first day as president, has turned an easy win for Biden's promised commitment to diplomacy into an entirely avoidable diplomatic crisis.

Trump's withdrawal from the JCPOA and imposition of brutal "maximum pressure" sanctions on Iran were broadly condemned by Democrats and U.S. allies alike. But now Biden is making new demands on Iran to appease hawks who opposed the agreement all along, risking an outcome in which he will fail to reinstate the JCPOA and Trump's policy will effectively become his policy. The Biden administration should re-enter the deal immediately, without preconditions.

2. U.S. Bombing Wars Rage On – Now In Secret. Also following in Trump's footsteps, Biden has escalated tensions with Iran and Iraq by [attacking](#) and killing Iranian-backed Iraqi forces who play a critical role in the war against ISIS in Iraq and Syria. Biden's February 25 U.S. airstrike predictably failed to end rocket attacks on deeply unpopular U.S. bases in Iraq, which the Iraqi National Assembly passed a [resolution to close](#) over a year ago.

The U.S. attack in Syria has been condemned as illegal by members of Biden's own party, reinvigorating efforts to repeal the 2001 and 2002 Authorizations for the Use of Military Force that presidents have misused for 20 years. [Other airstrikes](#) the Biden administration is conducting in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria are shrouded in secrecy, since it has not resumed publishing the monthly [Airpower Summaries](#) that every other administration has published [since 2004](#), but which Trump discontinued a year ago.

3. Refusing to hold MBS accountable for the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi. Human rights activists were grateful that President Biden released the intelligence report on the gruesome murder of Washington Post columnist Jamal Khashoggi that confirmed what we already knew: that Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman (MBS) [approved](#) the murder. Yet, when it came to holding MBS accountable, Biden choked.

At the very least, the administration should have imposed the same sanctions on MBS, including asset freezes and travel bans, that the [U.S. imposed](#) on lower-level figures involved in the murder. Instead, like Trump, Biden is wedded to the Saudi dictatorship and its diabolical Crown Prince.

4. Clinging to Trump's absurdist policy of recognizing Juan Guaidó as President of Venezuela. The Biden administration missed an opportunity to establish a new approach towards Venezuela when it decided to continue to recognize Juan Guaidó as "interim president", ruled out talks with the Maduro government and appears to be freezing out the moderate opposition that participates in elections.

The administration also said it was in "no rush" to lift the Trump sanctions despite a [recent study](#) from the Government Accountability Office detailing their negative impact on the economy, and a scathing [preliminary report](#) by a UN Special Rapporteur, who noted their "devastating effect on the whole population of Venezuela." The lack of dialogue with all political actors in Venezuela risks entrenching a policy of regime change and economic warfare for years to come, similar to the failed U.S. policy towards Cuba that has lasted for 60 years.

5. Following Trump on Cuba instead of Obama. The Trump administration [overturned](#) all the progress towards normal relations achieved by President Obama, sanctioning Cuba's tourism and energy industries, blocking coronavirus aid shipments, restricting remittances to family members, [putting](#) Cuba on a list of "state sponsors of terrorism," and [sabotaging](#) Cuba's international medical missions, which were a major source of revenue for its health system.

We expected Biden to immediately start unraveling Trump's confrontational policies, but catering to Cuban exiles in Florida for domestic political gain apparently takes precedence over a humane and rational policy towards Cuba, for Biden as for Trump.

Biden should instead start working with the Cuban government to allow the return of diplomats to their respective embassies, lift all restrictions on remittances, make travel easier, and work with the Cuban health system in the fight against COVID-19, among other measures.

6. Ramping up the Cold War with China. Biden seems committed to Trump's self-defeating Cold War and arms race with China, talking tough and ratcheting up tensions that have led to racist hate crimes against East Asian people in the United States. But it is the United States that is militarily surrounding and threatening China, not the other way round. As former President Jimmy Carter [patiently explained](#) to Trump, while the United States has been at war for 20 years, China has instead invested in 21st century infrastructure and in its own people, lifting 800 million of them out of poverty.

The greatest danger of this moment in history, short of all-out nuclear war, is that this aggressive U.S. military posture not only justifies unlimited U.S. military budgets, but will gradually force China to convert its economic success into military power and follow the United States down the tragic path of military imperialism.

7. Failing to lift painful, illegal sanctions during a pandemic. One of the legacies of the Trump administration is the devastating use of U.S. sanctions on countries around the world, including Iran, Venezuela, Cuba, Nicaragua, North Korea and Syria. [UN special rapporteurs](#) have condemned them as crimes against humanity and compared them to medieval sieges. Since most of these sanctions were imposed by executive order, President Biden could easily lift them. Even before taking power, his team [announced](#) a thorough review, but, three months later, it has yet to make a move.

Unilateral sanctions that affect entire populations are an illegal form of coercion, like military intervention, coups and covert operations, that have no place in a legitimate foreign policy based on diplomacy, the rule of law and the peaceful resolution of disputes. They are especially cruel and deadly during a pandemic and the Biden administration should take immediate action by lifting broad sectoral sanctions to ensure every country can adequately respond to the pandemic.

8. Not doing enough to support peace and humanitarian aid for Yemen. Biden appeared to partially fulfill his promise to stop U.S. support for the war in Yemen when he announced that the U.S. would stop selling "offensive" weapons to the Saudis. But he has yet to explain what that means. Which weapons sales has he cancelled?

We think he should stop ALL weapons sales to Saudi Arabia and the UAE, enforcing the [Leahy Law](#) that prohibits military assistance to forces that commit gross human rights violations, and the [Arms Export Control Act](#), under which imported U.S. weapons may be used only for legitimate self defense. There should be no exceptions to these U.S. laws for Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Israel, Egypt or other U.S. allies around the world.

The U.S. should also accept its share of responsibility for what many have called the greatest humanitarian crisis in the world today, and provide Yemen with funding to feed its people, restore its health care system and rebuild its devastated country. A recent [donor conference](#) netted just \$1.7 billion in pledges, less than half the \$3.85 billion needed. Biden

should restore and expand USAID funding and U.S. financial support to the UN, WHO and World Food Program relief operations in Yemen. He should also press the Saudis to reopen the air and seaports, and throw U.S. diplomatic weight behind the efforts of U.N. Special Envoy Martin Griffiths to negotiate a ceasefire.

9. Failing to back President Moon Jae-in's diplomacy with North Korea. Trump's failure to provide sanctions relief and explicit security guarantees to North Korea doomed his diplomacy and became an obstacle to the [diplomatic process](#) under way between Korean presidents Kim Jong-un and Moon Jae-in, who is himself the child of North Korean refugees. So far, Biden has continued this policy of Draconian sanctions and threats.

The Biden administration should revive the diplomatic process with confidence-building measures such as opening liaison offices, easing sanctions, facilitating reunions between Korean-American and North Korean families, permitting U.S. humanitarian organizations to resume their work when COVID conditions permit, and halting U.S.-South Korea military exercises and B-2 nuclear bomb flights.

Negotiations must involve concrete commitments to non-aggression from the U.S. side and a commitment to negotiating a peace agreement to formally end the Korean War. This would pave the way for a denuclearized Korean Peninsula and the reconciliation that so many Koreans desire — and deserve.

10. No initiative to reduce U.S. [military spending](#). At the end of the Cold War, former senior Pentagon officials told the Senate Budget Committee that U.S. military spending could safely be [cut by half](#) over the next 10 years. That goal was never achieved, and instead of a post-Cold War "peace dividend," the military-industrial complex exploited the crimes of Sept. 11, 2001 to justify an extraordinary one-sided [arms race](#). Between 2003 and 2011, the U.S. accounted for 45% of global military spending, far outstripping its own peak Cold War military spending.

Now the military-industrial complex is counting on Biden to escalate a renewed Cold War with Russia and China as the only plausible pretext for further record military budgets that are setting the stage for World War III.

Biden must dial back U.S. conflicts with China and Russia, and instead begin the critical task of moving money from the Pentagon to urgent domestic needs. He should start with at least the 10 percent cut that 93 Representatives and 23 Senators already voted for. In the longer term, Biden should look for deeper cuts in Pentagon spending, as in Rep. Barbara Lee's bill to [cut \\$350 billion](#) per year from the U.S. military budget, to free up resources we sorely need to invest in health care, education, clean energy and modern infrastructure.

A Progressive Way Forward

These policies, common to Democratic and Republican administrations, not only inflict pain and suffering on millions of our neighbors in other countries, but also deliberately cause instability that can at any time escalate into war, plunge a formerly functioning state into chaos or spawn a secondary crisis whose human consequences will be even worse than the original one.

All these policies involve deliberate efforts to unilaterally impose the political will of U.S. leaders on other people and countries, by methods that consistently only cause more pain and suffering to the people they claim – or pretend – they want to help.

Biden should jettison the worst of Obama's and Trump's policies, and instead pick the best of them. Trump, recognizing the unpopular nature of U.S. military interventions, began the process of bringing U.S. troops home from Afghanistan and Iraq, which Biden should follow through on.

Obama's diplomatic successes with Cuba, Iran and Russia demonstrated that negotiating with U.S. enemies to make peace, improve relations and make the world a safer place is a perfectly viable alternative to trying to force them to do what the United States wants by bombing, starving and besieging their people. This is in fact the core principle of the [United Nations Charter](#), and it should be the core principle of Biden's foreign policy.

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