

Biden's Foreign Policy Casts a Long Shadow

by Riccardo Alcaro

Upon taking office as US president, Joseph R. Biden vowed he would bring the United States back to the centre of the international stage¹ after the erratic course followed by Donald Trump. One year later, it can hardly be said that he has been successful.

Governance hurdles

Under Biden, the United States has again become very active in global governance frameworks. It re-joined the Paris Agreement on climate change² and in the run-up to the COP26 meeting in Glasgow made an important pledge, alongside the EU, to significantly bring down emissions of methane, a high-polluting gas.³ The

difficulty in enacting an ambitious domestic climate agenda, however, hampered the Biden administration's efforts to have stricter commitments to reducing greenhouse gas emissions approved at the Glasgow conference.⁴

Similarly, the sorry state of US democracy⁵ and the delegitimation campaign targeting the president himself⁶ have weakened the appeal of the agenda to promote democracy that Biden presented during an ad hoc

Press Release on the Global Methane Pledge, 18 September 2021, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_21_4785.

⁴ Kevin Liptak and Jeremy Diamond, "Biden Sees American Credibility on the Line as He Races to Lock Down Climate Action ahead of Glasgow", in *CNN*, 21 October 2021, <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/10/21/politics/climate-change-agenda-biden-administration-glasgow>.

⁵ Spencer Bokart-Lindell, "Is Civil War Looming, or Should We Calm Down?", in *The New York Times*, 13 January 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/13/opinion/civil-war-america.html>.

⁶ Barton Gellman, "Trump's Next Coup Has Already Begun", in *The Atlantic*, 6 December 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2022/01/january-6-insurrection-trump-coup-2024-election/620843>.

¹ White House, *Remarks by President Biden on America's Place in the World*, 4 February 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/02/04/remarks-by-president-biden-on-americas-place-in-the-world>.

² US Department of State, *The United States Officially Rejoins the Paris Agreement*, 19 February 2021, <https://www.state.gov/the-united-states-officially-rejoins-the-paris-agreement>.

³ European Commission, *Joint EU-US*

Riccardo Alcaro is Research Coordinator and Head of Global Actors programme at the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI).

international summit in December.

Nor was the US government capable of organising a global response to the Covid pandemic, limiting itself to making a commendable but ultimately impractical suggestion to waive vaccine patents.⁷

The US administration did achieve a major success when it persuaded the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) to approve its proposal for a global minimum tax,⁸ which should curb the ability of Big Tech corporations to benefit from ultra-generous foreign tax regimes. Doubts remain though about Biden's ability to persuade Congress to bring US legislation in line with the OECD tax deal.

Indo-Pacific advances

None of the issues above (with the partial exception of climate) has been nearly as important for Biden as handling relations with China. The president has not altered the direction of the China policy the United States had pursued under Trump, namely one of outright competition. However, Biden has replaced Trump's aggressive unilateralism with a multilateral approach.

⁷ "COVID-19 Vaccine Patents: EU Nations Divided over Lifting Intellectual Property Rights", in *Euronews*, 17 May 2021, <https://www.euronews.com/2021/05/06/us-backs-waiver-on-intellectual-property-rights-for-covid-19-vaccines>.

⁸ OECD, *International Community Strikes a Ground-Breaking Tax Deal for the Digital Age*, 8 October 2021, <https://www.oecd.org/tax/international-community-strikes-a-ground-breaking-tax-deal-for-the-digital-age.htm>.

In this, he has elevated the Quad gathering, a forum for dialogue between Australia, India, Japan and the United States, to summit level,⁹ struck the AUKUS deal with the United Kingdom and Australia¹⁰ (which will purchase US nuclear-powered submarines), tightened ties with Southeast Asian nations¹¹ and provided Taiwan with reassurances of US support in case of a Chinese aggression.¹²

In addition, the Biden administration and the EU have jointly adopted sanctions on Chinese officials for oppressing the Uyghur minority in Xinjiang¹³ and made China's economic and technological competition the main focus of a newly created transatlantic instrument,¹⁴ the EU-US Trade and Technology Council.¹⁵

⁹ White House, *Fact Sheet: Quad Leaders' Summit*, 24 September 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/09/24/fact-sheet-quad-leaders-summit>.

¹⁰ White House, *Joint Leaders Statement on AUKUS*, 15 September 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/09/15/joint-leaders-statement-on-aucus>.

¹¹ Anita Powell and Patsy Widakuswara, "Biden Expands US-ASEAN 'Strategic Partnership'", in *VOA News*, 26 October 2021, <https://www.voanews.com/a/biden-expands-us-asean-strategic-partnership/6286550.html>.

¹² "Biden Says US Will Defend Taiwan if China Attacks", in *BBC News*, 22 October 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-59005300>.

¹³ Jeannette Muhammad, "U.S. Joins EU in Sanctions Against China over Treatment of Uyghur Muslims", in *NPR*, 22 March 2021, <https://www.npr.org/980090541>.

¹⁴ Dimitar Lilkov, "The EU-US Trade & Technology Council: Red Light & Green Light", in *Martens Centre Blog*, 20 December 2021, <https://www.martenscentre.eu/?p=7489>.

¹⁵ US Trade Representative website: *U.S.-E.U. Trade and Technology Council (TTC)*, <https://www.ustrade.gov/ustrade/press-releases/2021/09/24/21-09-24-us-eu-trade-and-technology-council>.

Transatlantic rollercoasters

Biden's relations with European allies have witnessed ups and downs. Europeans resented the lack of substantive consultation over the withdrawal from Afghanistan¹⁶ and France reacted furiously to the AUKUS deal,¹⁷ which led Australia to cancel a pre-existing contract for the purchase of French-made submarines.

Yet, the general trend has been positive,¹⁸ with the United States and Europe edging closer to one another on climate, global minimum tax and China. Of great significance for the US-EU relations have been the decisions to lift the steel and aluminium tariffs¹⁹ and suspend those related to the Airbus-Boeing dispute,²⁰ both of which had been adopted during the Trump years.

ustr.gov/useuttcc.

¹⁶ Matthew Karnitschnig, "Disbelief and Betrayal: Europe Reacts to Biden's Afghanistan 'Miscalculation'", in *Politico*, 17 August 2021, <https://www.politico.eu/?p=1797249>.

¹⁷ Anna Gross, Victor Mallet and James Politi, "French Rage Triggered by Exclusion from Indo-Pacific Deal", in *Financial Times*, 19 September 2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/55b0f7ab-658d-4ec8-aa09-c0c6e43aed5c>.

¹⁸ Bruce Stokes and Rachel Tausendfreund, "A Transatlantic Rating of Biden's First Year in Office", in *GMF Insights*, 18 January 2022, <https://www.gmfus.org/node/20297>.

¹⁹ David Lawder and Andrea Shalal, "U.S., EU End Trump-Era Tariff War over Steel and Aluminum", in *Reuters*, 30 October 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-eu-expected-announce-deal-ending-steel-aluminum-tariff-dispute-sources-say-2021-10-30>.

²⁰ Philip Blenkinsop, "U.S., EU Agree Truce in 17-Year Airbus-Boeing Conflict", in *Reuters*, 16 June 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/eu-us-set-unveil-truce-17-year-aircraft-battle-2021-06-15>.

Most importantly, the Biden administration has coordinated extensively with its European allies in the attempt to put together a coherent response to Russia's threatening posture towards Ukraine.²¹ Along with NATO, the United States has presented Russia with a set of proposals on arms control, transparency and confidence-building measures,²² while rejecting demands that NATO abandon its open-door policy and scale down its military deployments in Central and Eastern Europe.

The US administration has also agreed with the EU that an escalation in Ukraine would trigger wide-ranging economic sanctions.²³ Biden's approach to Russia has won widespread support in Europe,²⁴ notwithstanding French President Emmanuel Macron's insistence that the EU should pursue a parallel dialogue with Moscow.

²¹ White House, *Fact Sheet: U.S. Diplomatic Engagement with European Allies and Partners Ahead of Talks with Russia*, 10 January 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/01/10/fact-sheet-u-s-diplomatic-engagement-with-european-allies-and-partners-ahead-of-talks-with-russia>.

²² NATO, *NATO-Russia Council Meets in Brussels*, 12 January 2022, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_190643.htm.

²³ Philip Blenkinsop, Gabriela Baczynska and Robin Emmott, "EU Leaders Agree on New Sanctions with U.S. if Russia Invades Ukraine", in *Reuters*, 16 December 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/eu-leaders-consider-new-sanctions-against-russian-surprises-2021-12-16>.

²⁴ Henry Foy, Victor Mallet and Mehreen Khan, "Paris and Brussels Reassure US after Macron's Call for EU-Russia Talks", in *Financial Times*, 20 January 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/00308154-fd68-4ffe-8abf-4ea8493082cd>.

Iranian headaches

The Biden administration has revived transatlantic cooperation on the Iranian nuclear issue as well, arguably Trump's most poisonous legacy. In 2018 the former president left the deal struck in 2015²⁵ by Iran and six world powers – France, Germany, the United Kingdom, China, Russia and the United States, plus the EU (E3/EU+3) – that put stringent (though temporary) limits on Iran's nuclear activities while also creating an intrusive inspection regime.

Trump's calculus was that a policy of maximum economic pressure would force the Iranians to make greater concessions not just on the nuclear front but also on their ballistic capabilities and regional policies. Yet that approach delivered the opposite results. Not only did Iran exceed all nuclear limits imposed by the deal. It also increased its missile arsenal and engaged in more belligerent behaviour in the region.²⁶

Early on in his presidency, Biden decided he would bring the United States back into the nuclear agreement only if Iran committed first to return to compliance with its obligations. This meant that his administration and the

E3/EU+2 spent months negotiating with Iran how to reconcile the two processes. Before a final agreement could be reached a new, more hard-line government took office in Tehran. That brought a long lull in the talks, during which Iran's nuclear capacity, which is civilian in nature although it can be turned to military use with relative ease, continued to grow.²⁷

If the ongoing negotiations²⁸ between the E3/EU+3 and Iran fail to restore the nuclear deal, Biden would be left with very bad options. He would either have to accept Iran as a nuclear-threshold state, that is, capable of building a nuclear arsenal in a short period of time. Or he could opt for a bombing campaign against Iran's nuclear programme, with no guarantee of success in destroying it and at any rate risking a generalised conflict, as Iran would most likely retaliate by activating its allies in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen. Biden may ultimately pay a heavy price then for the caution with which he acted initially, not just by refusing to re-join the nuclear deal immediately but also to offer some goodwill gestures to Iran, as his European allies had urged him to do.²⁹

²⁵ *Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action*, Vienna 14 July 2015, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/122460/full-text-of-the-iran-nuclear-deal.pdf>.

²⁶ Susan B. Glasser, "You're Gonna Have a Fucking War": Mark Milley's Fight to Stop Trump from Striking Iran", in *The New Yorker*, 15 July 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/letter-from-bidens-washington/youre-gonna-have-a-fucking-war-mark-milleys-fight-to-stop-trump-from-striking-iran>.

²⁷ International Atomic Energy Agency, *NPT Safeguards Agreement with the Islamic Republic of Iran*, 17 November 2021, <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/21/12/gov2021-52.pdf>.

²⁸ International Crisis Group, "The Iran Nuclear Deal at Six: Now or Never", in *ICG Middle East Reports*, No. 230 (17 January 2022), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/node/18768>.

²⁹ Colum Lynch, "Europeans Fear Iran Nuclear Window Closing", in *Foreign Policy*, 26 March 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/03/26/europe-us-biden-iran-nuclear-deal-lift-sanctions>.

Afghan tragedies

A definitive assessment of the aforementioned issues is impossible as they are still ongoing. The case of Afghanistan is different. The swift takeover by the Taliban has shattered any illusion that the US withdrawal, originally agreed by Trump³⁰ but executed by Biden, is anything else than unequivocal defeat. Biden seems to have determined that ignoring the pledge made by his predecessor would have led to renewed attacks against US troops and therefore eventually warrant more resources in a secondary country for US strategic interests.³¹

Biden has been criticised not only for his decision to pull out, which had large public backing, but for the poor implementation of it. This criticism is legitimate only if it is also assumed that Biden, as well as his predecessors, should have negotiated with the Taliban an actual transfer of power rather than just the terms of the withdrawal of US troops while leaving the US-backed government in Kabul to fight alone. But this proposition was impossible to hold politically, as it would have amounted to an open admission that the United States no longer saw the Afghan government it had supported for twenty years as a legitimate interlocutor.

³⁰ *Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan*, Doha, 29 February 2020, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf>.

³¹ White House, *Remarks by President Biden on the End of the War in Afghanistan*, 31 August 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/31/us/politics/transcript-biden-speech-afghanistan.html>.

Thus, Biden did not have good options. He chose the most radical one in the attempt to free up diplomatic, financial and military resources for use in areas of greater US interest, starting with the Indo-Pacific. It may well be that in the long run Biden's decision will benefit the United States. For the time being, however, it has hardly benefitted Afghanistan, which is in the midst of a humanitarian catastrophe³² following the collapse of the internationally-funded government in Kabul, nor the president himself, whose popularity plunged following the Afghan debacle.³³

Pale lights, long shadows

Thus far, Biden's foreign policy has been a mixed bag. In his first year in office Biden achieved only modest results on climate and democracy, while the global minimum tax, an indisputable success, has yet to pass the test of ratification (most notably in the US Congress).

The withdrawal from Afghanistan has undermined the president's claim to competence vis-à-vis the US public and dented his international prestige. Biden has been effective in mustering allies and partners' support for his policies towards China, Russia and Iran, but

³² Maite Fernández Simon, "More than Half of Afghanistan's Population Faces 'Acute' Food Crisis this Winter, U.N. Finds", in *The Washington Post*, 25 October 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/10/25/afghanistan-food-crisis/>.

³³ Chris Kahn and James Oliphant, "Americans Give Biden Low Marks on Afghanistan Pullout: Reuters/Ipsos Poll", in *Reuters*, 30 August 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/americans-give-biden-low-marks-afghanistan-pullout-want-see-evacuations-through-2021-08-30>.

he has so far not solved or defused any of the pending issues with these countries.

That said, Biden may have laid the foundations for a more rational management of such issues in the years to come. In a world increasingly jolted by multipolar clashes, rational crisis management may well have become a viable definition of success.

20 January 2022

Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)

The Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) is a private, independent non-profit think tank, founded in 1965 on the initiative of Altiero Spinelli. IAI seeks to promote awareness of international politics and to contribute to the advancement of European integration and multilateral cooperation. Its focus embraces topics of strategic relevance such as European integration, security and defence, international economics and global governance, energy, climate and Italian foreign policy; as well as the dynamics of cooperation and conflict in key geographical regions such as the Mediterranean and Middle East, Asia, Eurasia, Africa and the Americas. IAI publishes an English-language quarterly (*The International Spectator*), an online webzine (*Affarinternazionali*), three book series (*Global Politics and Security*, *Quaderni IAI* and *IAI Research Studies*) and some papers' series related to IAI research projects (*Documenti IAI*, *IAI Papers*, etc.).

Via dei Montecatini, 17

I-00186 Rome, Italy

Tel. +39 066976831

iai@iai.it

www.iai.it

Latest IAI COMMENTARIES

Director: Andrea Dessì (a.dessi@iai.it)

- 22 | 02 Riccardo Alcaro, *Biden's Foreign Policy Casts a Long Shadow*
- 22 | 01 Fulvio Bersanetti, Nicola Bilotta, Raffaele Della Croce, Valeria Lauria and Nicolò Russo Perez, *Lessons from the T20: Five Priorities for Italian Infrastructure Investment*
- 21 | 63 Riccardo Alcaro, *The Italy–France Treaty is an Example of Wise Diplomacy*
- 21 | 62 Xixi Hong, *Italy Changes Track: From the Belt and Road to (Re) Alignment with Washington*
- 21 | 61 Alessandro Berti, *Re-Discovering Italy's Mediterranean Vocation*
- 21 | 60 Tiziano Girardi, *Broadening the Frame: Italian Tokenism on Israel/Palestine*
- 21 | 59 Amal Sadki, *Arms, Human Rights and Geopolitical Interest: Reflections on Italian Defence Exports*
- 21 | 58 Chiara Grazia Valenzano, *Mediterranean Equilibria: Italian-Turkish Balancing and Competition over Libya*
- 21 | 57 Riccardo Perissich, *Europe's Strategic Compass: Merits and Shortcomings*
- 21 | 56 Riccardo Alcaro, *Four Scenarios for the Iran Nuclear Deal*