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Interpreting the Biden Doctrine: The View From Moscow

It is the success or failure of remaking America, not Afghanistan, that will determine not just the legacy of the Biden administration, but the future of the United States itself.

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Evan Vucci / AP / TASS

The newly unveiled Biden doctrine, which renounces the United States' post-9/11 policies of remaking other societies and building nations abroad, is a foreign policy landmark.

Coming on the heels of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, it exudes credibility. Indeed, President Biden's moves essentially formalize and finalize processes that have been under way for over a decade.

It was Barack Obama who first pledged to end America's twin wars — in Iraq and Afghanistan

— started under George W. Bush. It was Donald Trump who reached an agreement with the Taliban on a full U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021. Both Obama and Trump also sought, albeit in strikingly different ways, to redirect Washington's attention to shoring up the home base.

It is important for the rest of the world to treat the change in U.S. foreign policy correctly. Leaving Afghanistan was the correct strategic decision, if grossly overdue and bungled in the final phases of its implementation. Afghanistan certainly does not mean the end of the United States as a global superpower; it simply continues to be in relative and slow decline.

Nor does it spell the demise of American alliances and partnerships. Events in Afghanistan are unlikely to produce a political earthquake within the United States that would topple President Biden. No soul searching of the kind that Americans experienced during the Vietnam War is likely to emerge. Rather, Washington is busy recalibrating its global involvement. It is focusing even more on strengthening the home base.

Overseas, the United States is moving from a global crusade in the name of democracy to an active defense of liberal values at home and Western positions abroad.

Afghanistan has been the most vivid in a long series of arguments that persuaded Biden's White House that a global triumph of liberal democracy is not achievable in the foreseeable future.

Thus, remaking problematic countries — "draining the swamp" that breeds terrorism, in the language of the Bush administration — is futile.

U.S. military force is a potent weapon, but no longer the means of first resort. The war on terror as an effort to keep the United States safe has been won: in the last twenty years, no major terrorist attacks occurred on U.S. soil.

Meantime, the geopolitical, geoeconomic, ideological, and strategic focus of U.S. foreign policy has shifted. China is the main — some say, existential — challenger, and Russia the principal disrupter. Iran, North Korea, and an assortment of radical or extremist groups complete the list of adversaries. Climate change and the pandemic have risen to the top of U.S. security concerns. Hence, the most important foreign policy task is to strengthen the collective West under strong U.S. leadership.

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The global economic recession that originated in the United States in 2007 dealt a blow to the U.S.-created economic and financial model; the severe domestic political crisis of 2016–2021 undermined confidence in the U.S. political system and its underlying values; and the COVID-19 disaster that hit the United States particularly hard have all exposed serious political, economic, and cultural issues and fissures within American society and polity. Neglecting the home base while engaging in costly nation-building exercises abroad came at a price.

Now the Biden administration has set out to correct that with huge infrastructure

development projects and support for the American middle class.

America's domestic crises, some of the similar problems in European countries, and the growing gap between the United States and its allies during the Trump presidency have produced widespread fears that China and Russia could exploit those issues to finally end U.S. dominance and even undermine the United States and other Western societies from within.

This perception is behind the strategy reversal from spreading democracy as far and wide as Russia and China to defending the U.S.-led global system and the political regimes around the West, including in the United States, from Beijing and Moscow.

That said, what are the implications of the Biden doctrine? The United States remains a superpower with enormous resources which is now trying to use those resources to make itself stronger. America has reinvented itself before and may well be able to do so again. In foreign policy, Washington has stepped back from styling itself as the world's benign hegemon to assume the combat posture of the leader of the West under attack.

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Within the collective West, U.S. dominance is not in danger. None of the Western countries are capable of going it alone or forming a bloc with others to present an alternative to U.S. leadership. Western and associated elites remain fully beholden to the United States.

What they desire is firm U.S. leadership; what they fear is the United States withdrawing into itself. As for Washington's partners in the regions that are not deemed vital to U.S. interests, they should know that American support is conditional on those interests and various circumstances.

Nothing new there, really: just ask some leaders in the Middle East. For now, however, Washington vows to support and assist exposed partners like Ukraine and Taiwan.

Embracing isolationism is not on the cards in the United States. For all the focus on domestic issues, global dominance or at least primacy has firmly become an integral part of U.S. national identity. Nor will liberal and democratic ideology be retired as a major driver of U.S. foreign policy.

The United States will not become a "normal" country that only follows the rules of realpolitik. Rather, Washington will use values as a glue to further consolidate its allies and as a weapon to attack its adversaries. It helps the White House that China and Russia are viewed as malign both across the U.S. political spectrum and among U.S. allies and partners, most of whom have fears or grudges against either Moscow or Beijing.

In sum, the Biden doctrine does away with engagements that are no longer considered promising or even sustainable by Washington; funnels more resources to address pressing domestic issues; seeks to consolidate the collective West around the United States; and sharpens the focus on China and Russia as America's main adversaries. Of all these, the most important element is domestic.

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