



US Foreign Policy on the Verge of the Election

by Alex Joffe

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,733, September 7, 2020

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: With the US Presidential election rapidly approaching, an assessment of US foreign policy is in order. The Trump administration has undertaken conceptual shifts that see China as an adversary and Russia as a fading power, and it has deprioritized the Middle East and Europe. Without robust diplomatic and military engagement, these new policies risk ceding those regions to Chinese domination. In contrast, evidence suggests a Biden administration would largely return to the policies of the Obama era that accommodated Chinese imperialism.

With fewer than three months remaining until the US presidential election, how are we to assess the foreign policy accomplishments of the Trump administration and the aspirations of a possible Biden administration? The two most bizarre presidential campaigns in history and the terrible impact of the coronavirus pandemic, not to mention the violent political unrest surging across the country, make the task especially difficult.

From the beginning, any assessment of the Trump administration has been complicated by its lack of clear messaging, ad hoc policy process, and transactional and personalized decision-making at the highest levels.

The Trump administration's fundamental premise is represented by the maladroit phrase "America First." Trump uses this phrase to mean that American economic and political interests should be privileged over both abstract conceptions of state behavior and internationalist ideals of global management by multilateral organizations.

With this in mind—and fully cognizant of the confusing and often agonizingly frustrating manner in which policies were developed and executed—we can begin to list some of the things the administration got right and wrong. Overall, the impact of

innovative conceptual changes has been limited by an aversion to sustained diplomacy and continued military deployments.

After several rounds of personal outreach and trade negotiations, senior members of the Trump administration [admitted](#) that the Chinese Communist Party is an implacably evil adversary. In dramatic contrast to the preceding 50 years of American policy, the current administration recognized that China's rise has not been peaceful; that Chinese domination of manufacturing and global supply chains has devastated American industry, thanks in no small part to its theft of intellectual property on an extraordinary scale; and that prosperity has only exacerbated the Communist Party's global totalitarian aspirations.

Addressing this has entailed preliminary actions at home—sanctioning entities involved in human rights abuses, shutting down massive espionage, and encouraging industries to relocate from China, particularly in the wake of the pandemic. Abroad, it has meant emphasizing freedom of navigation in Chinese-claimed waters and helping to catalyze Pacific and Asian states such as Australia and Vietnam to recognize that China is their adversary as well.

But far more needs to be done. It will be critical to constrain China's "Belt and Road" initiative, recognize its "string of pearls" facilities as military vanguards, and [thwart both Chinese ambitions in the Middle East](#) and Chinese-Russian cooperation. Washington's dramatically improved relations with India are a vital part of this emerging strategy, and more explicit support should be offered to Japan and especially Taiwan. But contrary to one of the Trump administration's fundamental premises, continued American military deployments in the Middle East and Europe are required.

Unfortunately, the failed misstep of reaching out to North Korea, in keeping with every other attempt by US administrations to attempt this, detracted from the development of a China containment policy. Moreover, enormous Chinese investments in Europe and traditional European anti-Americanism have made elites there reluctant to take action. Diplomatic outreach to Europe—hardly a Trump administration specialty—is urgently needed.

In contrast to China, the US administration has recognized that Russia is a fading power, save for its instinctive desire to act as a spoiler against Western states and interests wherever it can. The recent redeployment of US troops from Germany to Poland, Belgium, and Italy caused considerable hysteria, but it acknowledged that Russia's military threat to Western Europe is minimal while the possibility of its economic domination through energy supplies is very real. Not surprisingly, the American diplomatic offensive against the Nord Stream 2 pipeline has been as unwelcome as the German troop reductions.

Europe has made no attempt to disguise its disgust at the substance and manner of the Trump administration. Part of this is tradition, but it also reflects a growing recognition that the Trump administration has deprioritized Europe. While bilateral relations with individual states, especially Britain, remain critical, the US does not regard imperial institutions such as the European Union as worthy of particular respect or admiration, while NATO is seen mostly as an outdated mechanism for free-riding. But as noted, China's global ambitions have generally been denied by Europeans and insufficiently emphasized by American diplomacy.

The Middle East is being similarly deprioritized, much to the alarm of local observers. Israeli security is guaranteed, largely by Israel itself, while the US focus remains on Iran as a regional and global threat. Here, however, the administration's attention has waned, along with neglect of China's overall imperial program. The continued deference to Turkey, which has now extended its aggression to the southern Mediterranean and Aegean, has been especially short-sighted. Similarly, the lack of focus on the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern refugee crisis as both a security and economic threat to Europe and then the US is alarming.

This refusal to engage is in sharp contrast to the full recognition the Trump administration has shown at home regarding the essential connection between border security and economic development. Though endlessly derided as "racist," the sharp reduction in illegal immigration to the US from Central and South America prior to the pandemic had a direct domestic impact by raising employment and wages for American workers.

Writ large, national border and economic policies reflect the recognition, not restricted to the US, that globalization has decimated local industries, put nations into downward wage spirals, and delivered them into the hands of rapacious trading partners, above all China. But enhancing the ability of smaller states to resist [Chinese debt trap diplomacy](#) has not been a US priority.

Predictably, the process of disengaging from regions that can or should defend themselves has revealed a contradiction. Local actors accustomed to US support and deference, in tacit exchange for lucrative defense and development contracts, are turning to Russia or China. That [Saudi Arabia has entered into agreements with China regarding nuclear development](#) is alarming but not surprising. That France [refuses to disengage from Huawei's 5G technology](#), thus opening itself directly to Chinese espionage and exploitation, is less explicable.

With regard to Democratic candidate Joe Biden, who remains largely out of sight, the task of assessing a possible foreign policy is made easier by [explicit statements released by the campaign and interviews with advisors](#). Biden's foreign policy leadership team, which includes Anthony Blinken, Nicholas Burns, and Jake

Sullivan, represents the clearest possible return to the Bush-Clinton, and especially Obama-era, foreign policy communities.

Their internationalist orientation is unmistakable. Biden and his team have stated that the so-called "Muslim ban" on immigration from countries that cannot vet effectively for terrorist connections would be the first Trump policy to be reversed. Restored participation in the Paris Climate Accord coupled with the "[Green New Deal](#)," restored funding to the World Health Organization and UNESCO, renewed assistance to the Palestinian Authority and UNRWA, and immediate outreach to European leaders are also at the top of the agenda.

These policies are tantamount to restoring the European lead on key international issues. Some, like the "Green New Deal," would be phenomenally expensive and would deliberately cripple American industries, such as energy production.

Removing funding for the southern border wall and reversing agreements that have kept asylum seekers in Mexico and Latin American countries are also key initiatives. Biden himself has indicated support for eliminating immigration enforcement and [increasing the resettlement of "irregular migrants,"](#) and he is being pushed hard to the left by progressives to open the border entirely. Development aid for the Southern hemisphere represents a return to traditional American approaches.

Biden's China policy is more difficult to discern. On the one hand, Biden appears to have reversed his attitudes completely in the past year, with calls for sanctions and condemnations of Chinese repression. On the other, [many of Biden's advisors and supporting characters](#) still call for cooperation with China and for the US to tone down its condemnation.

Statements regarding a more "coercive toolkit" are code for a return to the painfully slow, process-obsessed Obama administration, which agonized over every detail while declining to fundamentally change profitable economic arrangements. So far, a return to "Cold War thinking" is eschewed in favor of issue-specific "competition," which ignores the holistic nature and singlemindedness of Chinese policy. Biden is also being pressured from the left on a host of issues, including foreign policy. Some progressives even argue that [cooperation with China on climate change](#) is more important than addressing its human rights abuses.

While Biden has been cast, not always persuasively, as a strong supporter of Israel, his Obama-heavy team retains that administration's fundamental hostility, notwithstanding its anodyne statements (bitterly opposed by progressives) about its "[ironclad commitment to Israel's security](#)." But Biden also promises a return to the JCPOA deal with Iran, assuring "hard-nosed diplomacy and support from our allies to strengthen and extend it, while more effectively pushing back against Iran's other destabilizing activities," as well as ending support for Saudi operations against

Iranian-backed rebels in Yemen and the “forever war” in Afghanistan. How these interconnected policies would actually be brought about is not articulated.

That Trump and Biden are the best candidates the American system can offer is a sad commentary. One of the painful contradictions is that Trump’s innovative if only partially effective foreign policy has come at a bizarre and distasteful price, while a return to “normalcy” and “respectability” under Biden would entail policies that weaken America. These are impossible choices under any circumstances, and only more so in the benighted year 2020.

Alex Joffe is a senior non-resident fellow at the BESA Center and a Ginsburg-Milstein Fellow at the Middle East Forum.