

## Foreign Policy Decision Making Under President Biden

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### Abstract

*President Biden's foreign policy represents a significant departure from the Trump era, reviving key elements of liberal internationalism while adapting to new global realities. This article argues that Biden's grand strategy reflects continuity with long-standing traditions of democracy promotion and multilateralism, while also introducing new elements of economic protectionism and restraint when it comes to interventionism. By examining Biden's conceptualization of threats posed by China and Russia, his efforts to rebuild alliances, and skepticism toward globalization, this article highlights the Biden administration's difficult balancing act vis-à-vis competing priorities at home and abroad.*

President Biden has chartered a new but familiar path when it comes to foreign policy. In 2016, then-president Trump proudly declared he was his own “primary consultant” on foreign affairs.<sup>1</sup> Now, eight years later, the Biden-Harris administration has deepened alliances, rejoined global efforts to tackle transnational challenges, and invested at home—while listening to independent advisors. This article argues that President Biden’s foreign policy represents a significant departure from the Trump era, reviving key elements of liberal internationalism while adapting to new global realities through a more targeted approach to multilateralism, a heightened focus on democracy “defense,” and a shift away from unfettered globalization.

This article first describes how the Biden administration’s national security strategy and vision for the international order display continuity with long-standing Manichean “democracy versus autocracy” paradigms. Next, it shows how Biden has extended a containment-oriented approach toward China, despite claims to the contrary. Third, this article outlines Biden’s rhetorical commitment to core American values and national interests. At the same time, Biden’s turn away from full-fledged globalization and tempered, somewhat pessimistic version of American exceptionalism represent a departure from more established foreign policy traditions. Continuity in

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<sup>1</sup> Eliza Collins, “Trump: I Consult Myself on Foreign Policy,” *Politico*, March 16, 2016, para. 3, <https://www.politico.com/blogs/2016-gop-primary-live-updates-and-results/2016/03/trump-foreign-policy-adviser-220853>.

US grand strategy reflects the staying power of political culture and institutions, while divergences reflect the continued global march toward multipolarity and efforts by the Biden administration to distance itself from the legacies of Trump and Obama.

The Biden-Harris administration frames threats against the US in a universalistic, Manichean way that evokes Wilsonian-era thinking. President Wilson viewed democracy promotion as both a moral and practical duty for the United States.<sup>2</sup> Eager to aid the incipient global democratic wave, Wilson undermined his own calls for self-determination by sending troops to Haiti in 1915 and the Dominican Republic in 1916 in failed efforts to establish democratic states, lest “evil” win out. Wilson’s concern for Mexico’s nascent democracy also justified aggressive moral diplomacy and the occupation of the port city Veracruz by the US Navy in 1914. This era of American foreign policy framed global politics as an ideological battle between right and wrong, an existential struggle between democracies and non-democracies with the fate of the world hanging in the balance.

In a similar vein, Biden conceives of a “united front” of like-minded democratic allies pitted against an authoritarian “axis of evil” that threatens to dismantle US values and undermine global core interests.<sup>3</sup> As Biden explained during his first presidential news conference, competition with China and Russia represents a “battle between the utility of democracies in the 21st century and autocracies.”<sup>4</sup> In June 2022, Biden chose not to invite three non-democracies—Nicaragua, Venezuela, and Cuba—to a regional summit in Los Angeles, citing these countries’ lack of democracy and respect for human rights.<sup>5</sup> Biden, however, differs from Wilson in that he has not actively “promoted” or extended the democratic model; instead, Biden frames these choices as working to “defend” the existing liberal order.

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<sup>2</sup> Walter Russell Mead, *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How It Changed the World*, First Edition (New York, NY: Routledge, 2002), 88.

<sup>3</sup> Simon Tisdall, “Joe Biden’s Bid to Rally the ‘Free World’ Could Spawn Another Axis of Evil,” *The Observer*, December 13, 2020, sec. Opinion, para. 14, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/dec/13/joe-bidens-bid-to-rally-the-free-world-could-spawn-another-axis-of-evil>.

<sup>4</sup> David E. Sanger, “Biden Defines His Underlying Challenge With China: ‘Prove Democracy Works,’” *The New York Times*, March 26, 2021, sec. U.S., para. 2, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/26/us/politics/biden-china-democracy.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Eric Martin, “US Excludes Cuba, Venezuela, Nicaragua From Regional Summit,” *Bloomberg*, June 6, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-06-06/us-excludes-cuba-venezuela-nicaragua-from-regional-summit>.

Contrary to neo-liberal or realist theories of international relations, constructivism holds that social threats are constructed rather than inherent. After all, “500 British nuclear weapons are less threatening to the United States than 5 North Korean nuclear weapons, because the British are friends of the United States and the North Koreans are not.”<sup>6</sup> In this sense, Biden sees autocratic states as actors who threaten US interests by virtue of their regime type. At the same time, it is not autocracy per se that threatens US interests. Biden took a stand against the three aforementioned Latin American non-democracies because they contravene his normative visions of the world, but not necessarily because they explicitly undermine US core interests. Indeed, the 2022 National Security Strategy explicitly says that the countries which pose the greatest threat to the US are autocracies which specifically extend revisionist foreign policies that seek to overthrow (including by force) the existing international order. For this reason, Biden sees autocratic China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea as threats to US interests and security, but not necessarily autocratic Singapore or Vietnam.

To that end, ideas, and not just power, guide the administration’s thinking. Both China and Russia aim to establish an alternate, less democratic, less unipolar order, which, as it grows stronger, threatens US security. China’s push for greater influence in international organizations and promotion of alternate institutions challenge US constitutive authority in the multilateral arena. According to Johnston, constitutive authority refers to the power to shape the fundamental rules and norms of the international system, often through multilateral institutions.<sup>7</sup> For instance, China’s creation of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank in 2016 represents a challenge to the constitutive authority of the US-led World Bank and International Monetary Fund in setting the terms of global development finance. On the other hand, the threat posed by Russia primarily operates in the context of military incursions that undermine the rules-based international order and normative stances against the use of force. In either case, these countries’ promotion of alternative models of governance that do not respect human rights and political liberties challenge the universal nature of US normative visions. For this reason, Biden treats the global promotion of democracy—and efforts to prove its viability — as core steps to counteract autocratic influence and

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<sup>6</sup> Alexander Wendt, “Constructing International Politics,” *International Security* 20, no. 1 (1995): 73, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2539217>.

<sup>7</sup> Alastair Iain Johnston, “Is China Trying to Undermine the Liberal International Order?,” in *The China Questions: Critical Insights into US-China Relations*, 2, ed. Maria Adele Carrai, Jennifer M. Rudolph, and Michael Szonyi (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2022), 81–89.

critical components of his grand strategy. By this formulation, autocracies like China and Russia simultaneously constitute and threaten US national identity.<sup>8</sup>

Biden's dualistic framing of threats manifests itself most explicitly in the administration's approach to China. Long gone are the days<sup>9</sup> when US National Security Strategies "welcome[d] the rise of a China that is peaceful, stable, prosperous, and a responsible player in global affairs"; today, the US sees China as the "only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do so."<sup>10</sup> This shift in perception reflects both realist and constructivist considerations: On one hand, China's economy and military power have grown, as have overseas expansionist and illiberal tendencies under Xi Jinping. At the same time, however, thinking among top Biden strategists reflects disappointment over the lack of domestic reforms within China. Specifically, under the second Clinton-Gore administration, the US invoked modernization theory to argue China's ascension into the World Trade Organization would "move China faster and further in the right direction,"<sup>11</sup> a trend that has not materialized in the way the US leaders have hoped.<sup>12</sup> A more assertive Chinese grand strategy has also hardened the US stance. As Goldstein explains, territorial disputes in the East and South China Seas starting in 2008 marked a departure from previous doctrines of laying low in which China marketed itself as a willing partner in the international system that would act beneficially to other states.<sup>13</sup> Xi has reversed this course, resisting perceived challenges to China's core interests with renewed vigor while utilizing rhetoric like "rejuvenation of the Chinese nation." Today, worries about

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<sup>8</sup> Valerie M. Hudson and Benjamin S. Day, *Foreign Policy Analysis: Classic and Contemporary Theory*, Third edition (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2019), 351.

<sup>9</sup> More specifically, during the second Obama administration.

<sup>10</sup> President, "Remarks by President Obama and President Xi of the People's Republic of China in Joint Press Conference" (Washington, DC: White House, September 25, 2015), para. 5, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/09/25/remarks-president-obama-and-president-xi-peoples-republic-china-joint>; President, "National Security Strategy" (Washington, DC: White House, October 12, 2022), 8, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/8-November-Combined-PDF-for-Upload.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> In other words, toward democracy.

<sup>12</sup> Kurt M. Campbell and Ely Ratner, "The China Reckoning," *Foreign Affairs*, February 13, 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2018-02-13/china-reckoning>; Lisa Van Dusen, "The Tragic Legacy of Bill Clinton's China Doctrine - Policy Magazine," August 10, 2020, para. 4, <https://www.policymagazine.ca/the-tragic-legacy-of-bill-clintons-china-doctrine/>.

<sup>13</sup> Avery Goldstein, "China's Grand Strategy under Xi Jinping: Reassurance, Reform, and Resistance," *International Security* 45, no. 1 (2020): 176.

Chinese ambitions to “displace” the American order have achieved mainstream consensus in Washington.<sup>14</sup>

As such, Biden’s “Asia Czar,” Kurt Campbell, has declared the long-standing US policy of engagement a failure, pursuing a new strategy of “de-risking” that aims to undo decades of multidimensional and multifaceted interdependence with China.<sup>15</sup> In some ways, Biden has gone further than Trump in “de-risking” the US-China economic relationship to maintain US advantages while slowing China’s military modernization. Containment-minded policies incur heavy domestic economic costs; during the Cold War, for example, stopping the Soviet Union’s economic growth justified peacetime conscription, high taxes, federal intervention in civil society, and domestic surveillance.<sup>16</sup> For Biden, export controls and defensive economic policies risk hampering innovation and slowing economic growth in the US and beyond.<sup>17</sup> Cutting off China’s market access and ability to produce advanced semiconductor technology exacerbates bilateral tensions, a tradeoff the Biden administration is willing to make because it perceives American liberty and institutions as fundamentally under siege.<sup>18</sup> As Sheehan writes, the United States has cut off “both the U.S. talent and the components that make up the tools that make the chips.”<sup>19</sup> Decisions like this hurt US innovation, and despite Biden insisting he does not intend to “contain” China, officials

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<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Rush Doshi, *The Long Game: China’s Grand Strategy to Displace American Order*, Bridging the Gap (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

<sup>15</sup> Joe Cash et al., “West’s de-Risking Starts to Bite China’s Prospects,” *Reuters*, November 28, 2023, sec. Business, <https://www.reuters.com/business/wests-de-risking-starts-bite-chinas-prospects-2023-11-27/>; Peter Martin, “Biden’s Asia Czar Says Era of Engagement With China Is Over,” *Bloomberg*, May 26, 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-05-26/biden-s-asia-czar-says-era-of-engagement-with-xi-s-china-is-over>.

<sup>16</sup> Walter A. McDougall, “Back to Bedrock: The Eight Traditions of American Statecraft,” *Foreign Affairs*, March 1, 1997, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/1997-03-01/back-to-bedrock-eight-traditions-american-statecraft>.

<sup>17</sup> Diego Cerdeiro, Siddharth Kothari, and Dirk Muir, “Harm From ‘De-Risking’ Strategies Would Reverberate Beyond China,” IMF, October 17, 2023, <https://www.imf.org/en/Blogs/Articles/2023/10/17/harm-from-de-risking-strategies-would-reverberate-beyond-china>.

<sup>18</sup> Alex W. Palmer, “‘An Act of War’: Inside America’s Silicon Blockade Against China,” *The New York Times*, July 12, 2023, sec. Magazine, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/12/magazine/semiconductor-chips-us-china.html>; Ana Swanson, “Biden Administration Clamps Down on China’s Access to Chip Technology,” *The New York Times*, October 7, 2022, sec. Business, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/07/business/economy/biden-chip-technology.html>.

<sup>19</sup> Matt Sheehan, “Biden’s Unprecedented Semiconductor Bet,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, para. 1, accessed May 3, 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/10/27/biden-s-unprecedented-semiconductor-bet-pub-88270>.

on the other side of the Pacific view his administration's actions differently. Framing China as a peer competitor while invoking a "new Cold War" reflects containment-era thinking.<sup>20</sup> Finally, industrial policy has intentionally "broken down the dividing line between foreign policy and domestic policy," as the US works to strengthen innovation in the private sector and modernize its military in a manner similar to Cold War industrialization.<sup>21</sup>

The Biden-Harris administration has invoked earlier foreign policy traditions by emphasizing the Chinese threat to regional US spheres of interest. The Monroe Doctrine, first articulated in 1823 in response to Latin American independence movements, sought to prevent European powers from recolonizing or exerting undue influence in newly independent states including Colombia (1810), Mexico (1821), and Brazil (1822). Successive US administrations sought to secure American self-defense while leveraging great power politics to their advantage, vowing to defend against European military incursions in the Western hemisphere and creating an empire of liberty.<sup>22</sup> Although initially lacking the military capacity to enforce this doctrine, by the turn of the 20th century, the US was able to back up President Teddy Roosevelt's eponymous corollary that declared a US intention to intervene on behalf of neighboring Latin American nations.

Biden has worked to counteract the growing Chinese presence in Oceania and Latin America, especially when it comes to building out development finance and telecommunication infrastructure.<sup>23</sup> The administration is particularly worried about a growing Chinese sphere of influence in the Western Pacific given the implications for US alliances. For that reason, Biden has called for expanding the volume of US lending to Latin America to foster closer relations which have drifted closer to China (for instance, see China's port project in Chancay, Peru). Such measures would also induce

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<sup>20</sup> Hal Brands and John Lewis Gaddis, "The New Cold War," *Foreign Affairs*, October 19, 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-10-19/new-cold-war>; Peter Nicholas, "Biden Insists He's Not Trying to 'Contain' China as He Courts Beijing's Rivals," NBC News, September 13, 2023, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/joe-biden/biden-insists-s-not-trying-contain-china-courts-beijings-rivals-rcna104273>.

<sup>21</sup> President, "National Security Strategy," 11.

<sup>22</sup> McDougall, "Back to Bedrock."

<sup>23</sup> "Bids by Chinese and Other Companies for Pacific Cable No Longer Valid," *Nikkei Asia*, March 18, 2021, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Bids-by-Chinese-and-other-companies-for-Pacific-cable-no-longer-valid>.

economic development in Latin America that might help address underlying causes of regional migration.<sup>24</sup>

China has also increased its economic and strategic presence in Africa. In response, during a recent visit to Ghana, Vice-President Harris called on US businesses to increase their investments in the African continent.<sup>25</sup> The Biden-Harris administration recently outbid China to win a \$250 million contract for the reconstruction of the Lobito Corridor freight train line in Angola.<sup>26</sup> In the long term, the US' underlying threat assessment and consternation over rival nations' economic control in the near-abroad has demonstrated consistency with earlier strands of foreign policy thinking. But the US is no longer beholden to the whims of dominant nations; instead, the Biden administration has the capacity to deter unwanted foreign encroachment while offering more transparent and viable US alternatives. The challenge now will be continuing to win over the bloc of increasingly influential "geopolitical swing states" — an onus formed, in part, by a worldview that sees global affairs primarily through the lens of great power competition.<sup>27</sup> Geopolitical swing states are non-aligned countries which have global ambitions and can wield leverage over both the United States and China for their own advantage. Examples include Brazil, Vietnam, Saudi Arabia, and India.

Biden's foreign policy demonstrates a stronger emphasis on establishment processes and bipartisanship than previous progressive administrations. While Mead laments Biden's "democracy fixation" as unnecessarily divisive, the 2022 National Security Strategy details a willingness to work with ideological competitors on issues of transnational importance like counterterrorism and climate change.<sup>28</sup> For instance, despite concerns over democratic backsliding in India, Biden and Modi have engaged

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<sup>24</sup> Steve Holland and Andrea Shalal, "Eyeing China, Biden and Latam Leaders Tighten Economic Bonds," *Reuters*, November 3, 2023, sec. World, <https://www.reuters.com/world/with-an-eye-toward-china-biden-meet-latin-leaders-economics-migration-2023-11-03/>.

<sup>25</sup> Alexandra Wexler and Annie Linsky, "U.S. Pushes for Business Investment in Africa to Counter China's Reach," *Wall Street Journal*, March 29, 2023, sec. World, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-pushes-for-business-investment-in-africa-to-counter-chinas-reach-9c48518b>.

<sup>26</sup> Michael M. Phillips, "How the U.S. Is Derailing China's Influence in Africa," *WSJ*, January 21, 2024, <https://www.wsj.com/world/africa/angola-africa-china-us-railroad-f0e23523>.

<sup>27</sup> Jared Cohen, "The Rise of Geopolitical Swing States," Goldman Sachs, May 15, 2023, <https://www.goldmansachs.com/intelligence/pages/the-rise-of-geopolitical-swing-states.html>.

<sup>28</sup> Walter Russell Mead, "The Cost of Biden's 'Democracy' Fixation," *Wall Street Journal*, April 3, 2023, sec. Opinion, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-cost-of-bidens-democracy-fixation-autocracy-summit-freedom-house-ideology-foreign-policy-middle-east-86638fc5>; President, "National Security Strategy."

in personal diplomacy aimed at strengthening the bilateral relationship.<sup>29</sup> Unlike Wilson's Fourteen Points, which sidestepped domestic congressional approval and consensus among the allied powers, Biden has consulted allies and sought bipartisan consensus whenever possible, for instance, tying military assistance to Ukraine with more politically palatable issues like aid for Israel.<sup>30</sup>

To that end, while Liberal values underlie Biden's worldview—specifically, the promotion of democratic participation and defense of both negative and positive freedom—these values do not dominate or constrain his foreign policy agenda in the same way they did for Wilson.<sup>31</sup> These differences may reflect individual-level variations in the operational codes and philosophical beliefs between the two leaders.<sup>32</sup> But they also reflect environmental factors and iterative strategic thinking. In fact, Biden significantly reigned in the use of his signature phrase, “a battle between democracy and autocracy,” in 2023 compared with the first two years of his administration.<sup>33</sup> Domestic political institutions also create a different balance of power today, particularly through widespread and growing partisan polarization that treats cooperation across the aisle as a sacrifice rarely worth making.

Ultimately, Biden's foreign policy has fallen short of the unilateral and progressive nature of previous foreign policy traditions—as well as in comparison with his own domestic platform.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, Biden and Wilson converge in their efforts to leverage global public opinion to promote foreign policy, speaking directly to the masses instead of presenting foreign policy as a *fait accompli* forged in furtive meetings with far-off diplomats. For instance, Wilson embarked on a tour of the US and Europe

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<sup>29</sup> Toluse Olorunnipa et al., “Modi's White House Visit Tests Biden's Democracy-vs.-Autocracy Pitch,” *Washington Post*, June 22, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2023/06/21/biden-modi-india-democracy-autocracy/>.

<sup>30</sup> Yaroslav Trofimov, “Does the West Have a Double Standard for Ukraine and Gaza?,” *WSJ*, December 1, 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/world/does-the-west-have-a-double-standard-for-ukraine-and-gaza-81f72163>.

<sup>31</sup> Michael W. Doyle, “Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs,” in *International Politics: Enduring Concepts and Contemporary Issues*, ed. Robert J. Art, Timothy W. Crawford, and Robert Jervis, Fourteenth edition (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2023).

<sup>32</sup> Hudson and Day, *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 76.

<sup>33</sup> David Leonhardt, “A Subtle Change for Biden,” *The New York Times*, September 20, 2023, sec. Briefing, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/20/briefing/biden-united-nations.html>; Mead, “The Cost of Biden's ‘Democracy’ Fixation.”

<sup>34</sup> Asli Bâli and Aziz Rana, “Biden's Foreign Policy Doctrine Is Stuck in the Twentieth Century,” *The New Republic*, June 4, 2021, <https://newrepublic.com/article/162597/biden-foreign-policy-doctrine-israel-china-russia>.



to establish and promote the League of Nations, efforts that later earned him the Nobel Peace Prize, while Biden has emphasized a trade policy that allows collective bargaining and aims to increase wages for workers in the US and abroad.<sup>35</sup>

On his first day in office, President Biden signed an executive order for the US to rejoin the Paris Climate Accord, an international treaty on climate change signed into law in 2015 that President Trump withdrew from in 2019. Unlike Biden, Trump saw international politics as an “arena” rather than a “global community,” and he expressed a desire to fortify US economic sovereignty at the expense of the international system.<sup>36</sup> At best, Trump was an ambivalent ally; at worst, he berated NATO and criticized European partners while demanding more transactional relationships. Conversely, the Biden-Harris administration has stressed the importance of deepening US alliances and “leading the international response to ... transnational challenges.”<sup>37</sup> Biden reminds domestic and international audiences the US will defend “every inch of NATO,” and that the US commitment to the alliance remains “unshakeable.”<sup>38</sup> Biden has toned down calls for “burden sharing” while renewing diplomatic initiatives in the Indo-Pacific, especially with South Korea and Japan.<sup>39</sup> Compared with a Trump-Pence administration that shirked its role in global issues as the “indispensable nation,” Biden has returned the US to a path of multilateralism that took form after the end of WWII. This multilateral system fused internationalist ideas from the Atlantic Charter with the realities of Cold War competition, and the US after 1945 helped build and maintain a complex web of alliance security relationships that emphasized democratic solidarity

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<sup>35</sup> Jeanna Smialek, “Ambassador Tai Outlined Biden’s Goal of Worker-Focused Trade Policy,” *The New York Times*, June 10, 2021, sec. Business, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/10/business/economy/us-trade-katherine-tai.html>.

<sup>36</sup> Hal Brands, *American Grand Strategy in the Age of Trump* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2018), 162.

<sup>37</sup> President, “National Security Strategy,” 3.

<sup>38</sup> President, “Remarks by President Biden on the United States’ Response to Hamas’s Terrorist Attacks Against Israel and Russia’s Ongoing Brutal War Against Ukraine” (Washington, DC: White House, October 20, 2023), para. 21, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/10/20/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-united-states-response-to-hamass-terrorist-attacks-against-israel-and-russias-ongoing-brutal-war-against-ukraine/>; “Biden Says U.S. Commitment to NATO Is ‘Unshakeable,’” *Reuters*, February 19, 2021, sec. World, para. 1, <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKBN2AJ1ZS/>.

<sup>39</sup> Frank Aum, Mirna Galic, and Rachel Vandenbrink, “Biden’s Asia Trip Seeks to Revitalize Alliances, Focus on China,” United States Institute of Peace, May 25, 2022, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/05/bidens-asia-trip-seeks-revitalize-alliances-focus-china>.

across the Atlantic region.<sup>40</sup> The US saw and continues to see itself as a hegemonic sponsor of the liberal order and provider of “club” goods like providing security cooperation, trade, liberal democratic norms, and protection against autocracies while managing the world economy. In sum, Biden’s grand strategy reflects continuity with the longstanding push toward engagement and interdependence and sees global security as dependent on US hegemony and leadership.<sup>41</sup> At a more fundamental level, Biden’s emphasis on embedded multilateralism places faith in the power of states to coordinate their interests and cooperate for reasons beyond simple coercion; to that end, the US pursuit of power relates not just to security, but to normative goals as well.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, US thinking around partnerships since the end of WWII has evolved. Unlike during the struggle with the Soviet Union when the US pursued asymmetric and inflexible relationships, today, American partnerships are more comprehensive arrangements that blend security with ideational and economic commitments.<sup>43</sup>

While Biden’s foreign policy thinking clearly rejects unilateralism, his administration’s skepticism toward globalization marks a departure from long-standing traditions of “Global Meliorism.” Global Meliorism aimed to make the world better and safer through economic growth, human rights, and democracy. As McDougall explains, this Liberal approach to US foreign policy sees the main threats to US security as “products of oppression and poverty” and places faith in the capacity and willingness of the US to address these problems.<sup>44</sup> This worldview combines a Hamiltonian focus on US business with a sense of progressive imperialism made possible by the power

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<sup>40</sup> G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order*, Princeton Studies in International History and Politics (Princeton (N.J.): Princeton university press, 2011).

<sup>41</sup> Jared Cohen and Ian Bremmer, “The Global Credibility Gap: Assessing Underperformance and Overreach in Today’s Geopolitics,” Goldman Sachs, October 30, 2023, <https://www.goldmansachs.com/intelligence/pages/the-global-credibility-gap.html>.

<sup>42</sup> cf. John Mearsheimer, “Anarchy and the Struggle for Power,” in *International Politics: Enduring Concepts and Contemporary Issues*, ed. Robert J. Art, Timothy W. Crawford, and Robert Jervis, Fourteenth edition (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2023); Hans J. Morgenthau, “Six Principles of Political Realism,” in *International Politics: Enduring Concepts and Contemporary Issues*, ed. Robert J. Art, Timothy W. Crawford, and Robert Jervis, Fourteenth edition (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2023).

<sup>43</sup> Brett Ashley Leeds and Michaela Mattes, “Alliance Politics during the Cold War: Aberration, New World Order, or Continuation of History?,” *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 24, no. 3 (2007): 183.

<sup>44</sup> McDougall, “Back to Bedrock,” para. 34.

vacuum caused by the decline of the British Empire.<sup>45</sup> The success of FDR’s New Deal also encouraged an outward turn in combating the material causes of radicalism and aggression as exemplified by Truman’s Point Four Program and the creation of USAID.

While the Biden-Harris administration voices similar rhetoric in championing the US’ capacity to make the world safer and more economically viable, the US has turned away from free markets and globalization as the primary tool for doing so. Similarly to Trump, Biden has utilized defensive economic policies, imposing the highest tariffs on imports since Smoot-Hawley in 1930.<sup>46</sup> Biden has not lifted the blockade on appointing judges to the World Trade Organization Appellate Body, a decision initiated by Obama and continued under Trump.<sup>47</sup> Unlike Clinton and Obama, who pursued laissez-faire approaches to trade, Biden’s “foreign policy for the middle class” has led to a more protectionist stance on trade by offering tens of billions of dollars in subsidies, tax credits, and incentives to boost domestic manufacturing and “friend-shore” strategically important industries away from China.<sup>48</sup> US Trade Representative Katherine Tai has decried a globalist system “focused on low costs and weak regulations,” and Biden has characterized globalization as a “race to the bottom,” emphasizing the need to address the root causes of climate change, inequality, and populism instead of blindly prioritizing corporate profits.<sup>49</sup> The CHIPS Act, signed into law by Biden in August 2022, provides \$52 billion in subsidies for domestic semiconductor manufacturing, aiming to reduce US dependence on China and other potentially unreliable suppliers. Biden’s turn away from globalization is also part of a broader backlash against economic inequality, status anxiety, and perceived cultural

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<sup>45</sup> Mead, *Special Providence*, 84.

<sup>46</sup> Fareed Zakaria, “The Self-Doubting Superpower,” *Foreign Affairs*, December 12, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/self-doubting-superpower-america-fareed-zakaria>.

<sup>47</sup> Gavin Bade, “Joe Biden Wants a ‘New Economic World Order.’ It’s Never Looked More Disordered.,” *Politico*, May 25, 2023, <https://www.politico.com/news/2023/05/25/joe-bidens-economy-trade-china-00096781>.

<sup>48</sup> Joshua Green, “Can Biden Convince Americans His Brand of Populism Is Better Than Trump’s?,” *Bloomberg*, January 8, 2024, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2024-01-08/will-trump-s-or-biden-s-brand-of-populism-convince-voters-in-the-2024-election>; Sarah Kessler, “What Is ‘Friendshoring?’,” *The New York Times*, November 18, 2022, sec. Business, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/18/business/friendshoring-jargon-business.html>.

<sup>49</sup> Bade, “Joe Biden Wants a ‘New Economic World Order.’ It’s Never Looked More Disordered.,” para. 2; Gavin Bade, “Biden’s ‘Radical’ New Trade Agenda,” *Politico*, June 16, 2023, para. 5, <https://www.politico.com/newsletters/politico-nightly/2023/06/16/bidens-radical-new-trade-agenda-00102507>.

attacks concomitant to globalization.<sup>50</sup> To be clear, the US still sees commerce and interdependence as useful for American peace and global stability. But trade and interdependence are no longer heralded as simple panaceas to poverty and polarization, but rather as potential catalysts of those problems.

The US has always viewed itself as an exceptional nation. So too does the Biden-Harris administration, but with a strong recognition of the need to address domestic issues and the US' growing credibility gap. Doctrines of American Exceptionalism emphasize how the nation's founding documents explicitly enshrine security, prosperity, and preservation of the American way of life. US founders saw their experiment with democracy as both unique and universal, creating a shining "city on a hill" that would offer moral guidance to the rest of the world. Foreign policy by this approximation lacked an ideological foundation, although consensus existed over President Washington's neutrality policy. The main goal was simply to expand US democracy at home, creating a degree of separation from Europe that would give the US room to breathe. Early US grand strategists saw human nature as flawed and immutable, creating a need for checks and balances, humility, and prudence. As the US grew stronger, the US has shifted its preference from domestic consolidation to an effort to export its model abroad, but different administrations have realized this intention to varying degrees. For instance, George W. Bush intervened militarily in Iraq and Afghanistan to promote democracy in a much more heavy-handed manner than Trump or Obama ever did. Encouraged by "Vulcan" advisors Rice and Wolfowitz, Bush unleashed the full extent of US power in an effort to change the global post-9/11 threat environment for good.<sup>51</sup> At the time, both liberals and neoconservatives supported the Iraq war and believed the US could transform societies in the Middle East into democracies by force, demonstrating a "redemptivist" tint to American exceptionalism.<sup>52</sup> But what started as an agile incursion quickly metamorphosed into a "squandered victory," and post-conflict insurgency and the lack of US planning surrounding de-Ba'athification highlighted a dangerous disconnect between the design

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<sup>50</sup> Stephen Kotkin, "Realist World," *Foreign Affairs*, June 14, 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2018-06-14/realist-world>; Stefanie Walter, "The Backlash Against Globalization," *Annual Review of Political Science* 24, no. 1 (2021): 422–423, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-041719-102405>.

<sup>51</sup> Hal Brands, *What Good Is Grand Strategy?: Power and Purpose in American Statecraft from Harry S. Truman to George W. Bush*, Reprint edition (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014), 149.

<sup>52</sup> Joseph Stieb, "Whose Version of the War on Terror Won?," *War on the Rocks*, July 20, 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2022/07/whose-version-of-the-war-on-terror-won/>.

and implementation of grand strategy.<sup>53</sup> Even Biden, an establishment leader who himself supported the Iraq War, has developed a “skeptical streak toward nation-building,” and while his administration frames the war in Ukraine in moralistic, existential terms, Biden has made clear the US will not send American troops to Europe to fight Russia.<sup>54</sup>

To that end, the foreign policy decisions of previous administrations affect Biden’s decisions around grand strategy, creating an ideational transmission abetted by a hyper-polarized political landscape and cognitive fallacies like recency bias.<sup>55</sup> There also appears to be a clear link between a grand strategy’s underlying logic of values—whether leaders aim to extend their worldview abroad—and its logic of force—the propensity and willingness of leaders to use violence to achieve their aims. More specifically, Biden intends to export US values but is unwilling to use hard power as the primary mechanism for doing so. While his administration frames this restraint as a form of humility and a necessary corrective to past overextension, commentators like Zakaria criticize US “declinism” and pessimism over American capacity to compete in the current global playing field.<sup>56</sup> Nevertheless, Biden continues to emphasize domestic investment as a key national security priority, including but not confined to critical infrastructure. In addition, by addressing social and structural domestic issues, Biden typifies a form of “radical Wilsonianism” that simultaneously projects US values abroad while improving the situation at home.<sup>57</sup> In his administration’s words, “the future of America’s success in the world depends upon our strength and resilience at home,” and “the quality of our democracy at home affects the strength and credibility of our leadership abroad.”<sup>58</sup>

The Biden Administration has pursued a grand strategy consistent with foundational US interests and values. At a fundamental level, Biden has worked to augment US power amidst an anarchic international system in the pursuit of national

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<sup>53</sup> Brands, *What Good Is Grand Strategy?*, chap. 4; Larry Diamond, *Squandered Victory: The American Occupation and the Bungled Effort to Bring Democracy to Iraq*, First Edition (New York: Holt Paperbacks, 2006).

<sup>54</sup> Stieb, “Whose Version of the War on Terror Won?,” para. 29; President, “Remarks by President Biden on the United States’ Response to Hamas’s Terrorist Attacks Against Israel and Russia’s Ongoing Brutal War Against Ukraine.”

<sup>55</sup> Hudson and Day, *Foreign Policy Analysis*, chap. 2.

<sup>56</sup> Zakaria, “The Self-Doubting Superpower,” para. 34.

<sup>57</sup> Mead, *Special Providence*, 93.

<sup>58</sup> President, “National Security Strategy,” 7, *Ibid.* 14.

security, an interest realists argue is inherent to all states.<sup>59</sup> He has promoted democracy and played the “two-level game” inherent to international politics.<sup>60</sup> His administration has emphasized deepening alliances, rejoining global efforts to tackle transnational challenges after a four-year Trump aberration. In assessing the threat from China, The Biden administration evokes a Manichean worldview that places geostrategic competition in the center of a broader, ideational, and existential conflict while ramping up investment at home. As such, he has departed from laissez-faire economics and globalization that have defined the core of a “Global Meliorist” US grand strategy for decades. As relations with China, Russia, and nations around the world continue to evolve, Biden will have to keep reflecting on long-standing US foreign policy traditions, ensuring the tradeoff between resources and interests best achieves core US interests.

Needless to say, Biden should continue to, unlike Trump, consult the experts.

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<sup>59</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, “The Anarchic Structure of World Politics,” in *International Politics: Enduring Concepts and Contemporary Issues*, ed. Robert J. Art, Timothy W. Crawford, and Robert Jervis, Fourteenth edition (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2023).

<sup>60</sup> Robert D. Putnam, “Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games,” *International Organization* 42, no. 3 (1988): 427–60.