



THE DRIVERS AND PROSPECTS OF BIDEN'S FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS THE MIDDLE EAST

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In a July 2020 [conversation](#) hosted by the prominent U.S. Think Tank Hudson Institute, which came amid a tense electoral campaign for the presidential elections, then future Secretary of State Anthony Blinken made it clear that the Middle East would not figure high on Biden administration's foreign policy agenda, maintaining that "just as a matter of time allocation and budget priorities, [the U.S.] would be doing less not more in the region". As a matter of fact, such an approach is not a novelty and was first rolled out by Barack Obama through his well-known "Pivot to Asia", which was aimed at shifting the needle of the U.S. foreign policy compass towards the Pacific theatre and, more specifically, China. At that time, both Biden and Blinken served in the Obama administration as Vice President and - among other roles - Deputy National Security Advisor respectively, and were closely involved in the definition and implementation of foreign policies that have produced long lasting consequences in the region and laid the



foundations of what is widely regarded as today's dwindling attention towards its affairs on the part of Washington.

Nevertheless, as the recent and umpteenth escalation of violence between Israeli and Palestinians demonstrates, the Middle East seems bound to impose itself on every U.S. administration, no matter how committed U.S. presidents are to deprioritize the region and scale down American presence there. If past is prologue, thus, it seems to make sense to expect a continuation of U.S. involvement in most of the region's hottest dossiers, from the Israeli-Palestinian issue to the Yemeni civil war and, quite obviously, the nuclear negotiations with Iran. But the degree and manners of Washington's engagement are now anything but predictable, not only because we are still in the early stages of the new Biden presidency, but for two more reasons as well. First, the profoundly changed Middle East inherited by the new administration compared to that left by Obama to Donald Trump and characterized by regional dynamics and actors that appear less and less subject to influence by external players. Indeed, apart from the legacy of widespread popular struggle and violent socio-political repression at the hands of several governments, the past decade has seen the rise of regional countries that are more prone to embark on assertive foreign policies and even use military force with remarkable strategic autonomy, at times heedless of allies and partners' objections or disapproval. Such a scenario suggests that President Biden might find it harder to promote his policies among and influence U.S.' regional counterparts.

The second factor is the complex decision-making process behind any U.S. administration's foreign policy, which, in the case of Biden's, involves two closely interconnected sub-aspects: on the one hand, the challenge of striking a balance between the strategic reduction of U.S. commitments in the region, in order to focus on the competition with China, and the promise to put human rights and democracy back at the centre of America's global engagement after Trump's unconditional support for autocratic regional allies; on the other hand, the need to accommodate the different voices and tendencies within the administration, which in turn are likely to



follow the precepts of the major U.S. foreign policy schools. For the first sub-aspect, obtaining any tangible result will in fact require substantial and constant political as well as diplomatic efforts that only a concrete commitment can produce. When it comes to the second one, one should consider the influence that different foreign policy thoughts and traditions, which developed throughout U.S. history, exert on every administration's decisions. A question then arises on what Biden's foreign policy in the Middle East might look like, and what are the trajectories along which it could unfold.

A glance into American foreign policy schools of thought can help in this specific exercise. Without the claim of providing a definitive explanation, the categorisation first proposed by political scientist Walter Mead in his famed *Special Providence: American foreign policy and how it changed the world*¹ is useful for having a comprehensive overview of the main tendencies that have informed and shaped U.S. foreign policy since the country's independence. According to Mead, there exist four major traditions, or schools, named after just as many U.S. presidents: Jacksonians, Jeffersonians, Hamiltonians, and Wilsonians. The former tend to follow a nationalist-populist orientation, although their attitude towards foreign policy and international engagements is one of apathy and indifference unless they perceived an existential threat to American exceptionalism – and especially some of its core features such as individual freedoms – or the homeland itself, the two things they value the most. In a similar vein, Jeffersonians advocate a minimalist approach in foreign policy, whereby international commitments should be limited and the related costs and risks for the U.S. considerably reduced. In the Jeffersonians' *weltanschauung*, narrowly defined interests represent the best strategy to avoid the constraints imposed on American sovereignty by sometimes superfluous international agreements while focusing on domestic problems, with the ultimate goal of promoting liberty and prosperity at home.

¹ Walter Russel Mead, *Special Providence: American foreign policy and how it changed the world*, Routledge, New York, 2020.



Conversely, both Hamiltonians and Wilsonians are in favour of a more proactive role on the international stage. The former are strong supporters of the liberal order that the U.S. have inherited from Great Britain and led since the end of WWII. In particular, Hamiltonians are determined to uphold global capitalism, due to the great benefits it brings to the U.S. in terms of economic resources and public support. To ensure the stability of this system, therefore, Washington must promote free trade and guarantee international security, including through military force when necessary. Wilsonians, for their part, are equally committed to keeping the U.S. at the helm of international affairs, albeit for different reasons: they believe first and foremost in liberal democratic values, which they regard as the guiding principles of U.S. foreign policy. Hence, the expansion and protection of democracy and human rights, as well as the implementation of international law, must remain Washington's primary objectives, to be achieved through the establishment of multilateral organisations or, in the view of more conservative Wilsonians, even advancing democratic state-building abroad.

In Mead's opinion, the last two schools have dominated U.S. foreign policy since the inception of the Cold War, leading the struggle against the Soviet Union and directing the establishment of the US-led security architecture and liberal international order. Yet, such an order is not set in stone, and the last decade has in fact shown a progressive erosion of some of its pillars. To begin with, U.S. hegemony is now more contested, not only by so-called near-peer competitors such as China and Russia but also by some emerging powers that have seen in the partial dilution of U.S. global leadership and power an incentive to further their own ambitions. The Middle East offers some of the best examples, with Turkey and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) – two historic partners of Washington in the region – that have pursued increasingly autonomous foreign policies, sometimes against the advice of the U.S. itself. In turn, the partial regression of American global influence has also paved the way for renewed geopolitical rivalry in several regions, as the surge in global military spending and



rearmament, among other factors, suggests. Again, the Middle East and North Africa is no exception, [featuring](#) the highest regional average in terms of military burden (a country's military expenditure as a share of the GDP) at 4,9%, and with [five](#) of the top ten arms-importing states in the 2016-2021 period located in the region. Unsurprisingly, great-power competition has indeed regained prominence both in the U.S. official and mainstream discourses, but this perception was already taking shape during Barack Obama's tenure and further [consolidated](#) with his successor. With Biden, this is likely to continue, as Tony Blinken unambiguously outlined during the electoral campaign, and the Interim National Security Strategy (NSS) Guidance, published in early March, [reiterated](#). While the emphasis on "strategic competition with China or any other nation" cements a structural priority-shift towards the Indo-Pacific and Europe that was already in the making, it does not mean that part of this competition could not take place in the broader Middle East. The increased Russian military footprint in Syria and in Libya, for instance, has been carefully [monitored](#) by Pentagon's officials over the last year and, with Tu-22M3 nuclear-capable bombers now [deployed](#) at the Syrian Khmeimim airbase, it has good prospects of becoming a serious thorn in NATO's southern side.

Yet, it would be hasty to expect renewed military commitments in the region writ large by the current administration. The NSS Guidance, in fact, states that the U.S. "will right-size its military presence to [...] protect vital interests", including the disruption of international terrorist networks and the support to effective deterrence against Iran's aggressive activities. This not only points to the promise of ending "forever wars", as the soon-to-be-completed withdrawal from Afghanistan confirms, but it also reveals the intention to favour diplomacy and multilateral solutions over military force to solve the region's challenges. From Biden's perspective, however, diplomatic proactiveness fits into a wider foreign policy strategy that should include a fair burden-sharing with allies and partners in the region, especially when it comes to solving long-standing conflicts or increasingly convoluted crises. As



an informal Biden's adviser [put](#) it: [he and his administration] are just being extremely purposeful to not get dragged into the Middle East". Paradoxically, this idea of restraint, which finds expression in the Jeffersonian and Jacksonian traditions, is the same advocated by Donald Trump and Obama before him and reflects a sense of growing frustration within the U.S. for the spiral of quagmires and continuous military engagement in the region. Indeed, when it comes to the U.S. military footprint, the new administration is confirming the downsizing decisions made by the previous one, not just in Afghanistan, but also in Iraq, where all American combat troops are [expected](#) to leave the country by the end of 2021, and Syria, although here a token contingent is expected to stay for supporting Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in counterterrorism and stabilization operations. Consistent with this approach that sidelines military solutions in favour of diplomacy, Biden has also reviewed the U.S. policy towards Yemen, reversing Trump's outright backing to Saudi Arabia's and UAE military campaign against the Houthis through the [end](#) of all U.S. support for offensive operations, a [suspension](#) of major arms exports to the two Gulf allies, and the nomination of a U.S. Special Envoy to Yemen. Early results, however, seem to frustrate the administration's efforts to defuse conflict, as the Houthis [have capitalized](#) on the diplomatic window offered by the U.S. to reinforce their position and launch a new military offensive along the strategic front of Marib, while [slowing down](#) UN-led mediation efforts.

Restraint is also guiding the administration's overall strategy in Iraq, where the President has so far abstained from retaliating against several rocket attacks against U.S. troops and diplomatic buildings carried out almost daily by pro-Iranian militias. In partial contrast to his predecessor's more aggressive approach, culminated in the killing of Iranian General Qassem Soleimani at Baghdad International airport in January 2020 and the subsequent Iranian ballistic missile strike against U.S. targets in Iraq, Biden has opted in favour of a constant dialogue with the Iraqi authorities to sideline the militias' political influence and increase Washington's bargaining leverage with Iran over the nuclear issue and its



regional expansion. In the meantime, a single airstrike against Iranian-aligned groups along the Iraqi-Syrian border last February [marked](#) Biden's first use of military force and was in response to the death of a U.S. contractor by a rocket attack, but also served as a deterrent signal that the U.S. will not hesitate to react should new actions against American interests in the country occur. For now, the White House is eager to continue its security partnership with the Iraqi government while coordinating with local authorities for the foreseen withdrawal of U.S. combat troops, and current dynamics suggest that a reduced American military contingent is likely to stay in the country even after 2021, perhaps under NATO's banners.

The Israeli-Palestinian file as well indicates a cautious - if not reluctant - attitude on the part of the new administration. The fact that the recent ceasefire reached by Israel and Hamas after 11 days of war was mainly mediated by Egypt is a case in point and underlines the limited role played by Washington, likely because of the little return in terms of political and foreign policy advantage compared to the capital invested. Still, Biden's slow-motion reaction and unambiguous support for Israel's right to self-defence did not shelter him from a wave of bipartisan criticism, though for different reasons. To some Republicans, including former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, Biden's words of support to Israel [have been](#) too tepid and came too late, while his condemnation of Palestinian rocket attacks was too weak. On the other side of the political spectrum, several democrats, especially from the party's progressist wing such as Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Rashida Tlaib, have frowned on the President's support of Israel despite the latter's systematic abuses and discrimination against the Palestinians and its incommensurate use of force in Gaza, which [caused](#) more than 200 deaths, including scores of children. Cortez and Tlaib, together with Wisconsin Democratic Representative Mark Pocan, [echoed](#) by Senator Bernie Sanders, even [presented](#) a joint House resolution calling for the cancellation of a \$735 million worth sale of US-made weapons to Israel. While the White House has [confirmed](#) that the deal will be completed as planned, the



president is facing mounting pressure from a growing portion of his party to embrace a human rights-centred foreign policy and keep his electoral promises. Such a pressure is illustrative of a deepening [rift](#) within the party, as its staunchest Wilsonian component steps up its challenge to the support traditionally granted to Israel by the centrist and more conservative ones, but may also [indicate](#) a paradigm shift within the democratic constituency at large. On the one hand, ignoring these [signals](#) - as the White House has largely done thus far - confirms the need to mediate between different foreign policy visions without upending one of the core pillars of the U.S. strategy in the region, which Biden reiterated in his provisional NSS; on the other hand, it nonetheless risks to alienate the party's support to the president's foreign policy vision and compromise its overall implementation. The decision to [restore](#) \$200m million in economic and development aid to the Palestinians represents too small a step in this respect, as the administration's approach [seems](#) more focused on managing the conflict rather than solving it.

Then there is the Iranian dossier, which is intertwined with U.S.-Israeli bilateral relations. At least on paper, we are witnessing a substantial departure from Trump's aggressive "maximum pressure" policy towards Teheran, starting from Biden's availability to reopen diplomatic negotiations and lift the harsh economic sanctions imposed by his predecessor, so long as Iran accepts to resume compliance with the deal and discuss its terms. Biden's goal is to revive diplomacy and bring Washington back on board with an agreement that, in a view similar to that of its major advocate Barack Obama, advances U.S. national security interests in the region. However, after several rounds of indirect talks between U.S. and Iranian officials, conducted in the framework of the multilateral discussions between Teheran and the five members of the JCPOA's Joint Commission², the parts [have not](#) yet reached a common ground. A major bone of contention concerns the tangle of sanctions imposed by the Trump administration in

² France, Germany, United Kingdom, China and Russia, mediated by the European Union.



2018, with American officials who seem now open to revoking those that are inconsistent with the deal or that would continue to damage the Iranian economy even if Teheran were to observe again the accord's conditions. Due to the diverse nature of these measures, such step could include non-nuclear sanctions, such as those related to Iranian sponsorship of terrorism, missile-technology development as well as human rights, but the new administration might have a bumpy road ahead, especially if domestic political opposition, including from democrats' more sceptic fringes, succeeds in jeopardizing the president's plan. In this respect, bipartisan initiatives like the one led by the influential Democratic Senator Robert Menendez and Republican colleague Lindsey Graham - which gathers 43 senators (28 republicans, 14 democrats and 1 independent) - is [asking](#) the president a broader renegotiation that should include specific limitations to Iran's missile program and an end to its support to proxy groups such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Popular Mobilisation Units in Iraq, among others. Two further variables should be factored into the equation. First, Israel's efforts to derail or complicate the administration diplomatic engagement with Teheran, as the recent attack on the Iranian Uranium-enrichment facility at Natanz, allegedly carried out by Israel, [suggests](#). On the one hand, under Netanyahu's conservative governments, Israel has tenaciously opposed the deal negotiated by the Obama administration back in 2015 based on its perceived inability to curb both Iran's malicious activities in the region and its secret nuclear programme, while, on the other hand, it has escalated a [shadow war](#) against the Islamic Republic. Second, the results of the upcoming presidential elections in Iran, which may play a decisive role in the future of the JCPOA. Should a candidate of the hawkish conservative factions win, in fact, the Biden administration would deal with a tougher interlocutor and have fewer incentives to embark on a draining negotiation with uncertain outcomes. But the risk of a costly military confrontation is likely to deter both sides and ultimately push them to the negotiation table.



Conclusions

In some respects, Biden's approach to the Middle East resembles the vision adopted by his democratic predecessor Barack Obama, which emphasizes human rights, multilateral engagement and, especially during his first term, democracy promotion. These principles reflect a Wilsonian tendency that has largely shaped U.S. foreign policy since the onset of the Cold War, but one that has progressively lost grip after 9/11, when the terrorist attacks on U.S. soil struck an emotional chord with Jacksonians and ushered in a season of military campaigns in the framework of the Global War on Terror, aimed at eradicating terrorism and, at a later stage, establishing democracy through externally engineered regime change. Wilsonians such as Hilary Clinton and, to a lesser degree, Joe Biden himself coalesced with Jacksonians and actively supported Bush's decision to invade Iraq in 2003, but when results failed to materialize both there and in Afghanistan, a sense of war fatigue gained traction and generated dissatisfaction and disillusion within both the American public and the politicians in Washington. Jeffersonian calls for disengagement from the region mushroomed and prompted a partial adjustment to the trajectory of the U.S. approach, but were not strong enough to structurally alter its nature, which has remained largely militarized. Obama embraced these calls and tried to reduce U.S. regional commitments by ordering the withdrawal from Iraq while pivoting to Asia, although he could not dismiss humanitarian concerns within his own administration for the bloody repression by Libyan dictator Qaddafi in 2011, authorizing a limited military intervention that helped rebels to topple the regime but miserably failed to bring peace in the country. With the Libyan fiasco still fresh in memory, two years later he decided not to intervene in Syria against Bashar al-Assad's bloody autocracy despite the red line he himself had drawn regarding the use of chemical weapons. That decision opened the door for a bitter debate about the scope, values, and interests of American foreign policy and confirmed the extent to which a Jeffersonian desire for restraint and rationalization got enshrined in Obama's foreign policy vision. Such



desire had inevitably to be balanced with a more proactive Wilsonian support for multilateralism, as the JCPOA symbolizes, but it nonetheless survived into the Trump administration, albeit for different reasons, and it is likely to do so also with Joe Biden at the White House. Like his Republican predecessor, Biden concurs that long and costly military adventures have been detrimental to U.S. interests, yet he disagrees on all the rest. For this very reason, we should expect a comeback of Wilsonianism in terms of a deeper commitment to multilateral diplomacy, closer dialogue with allies and partners as well as renewed emphasis on human rights and international law, for the mood now in Washington is that the use of force must become the last resort in the U.S. foreign policy toolbox. However, it would be naïve to assume these intentions will produce immediate and tangible results, for countries in the region are arming and gearing up for a phase of greater competition in which human rights and meaningful socio-economic reforms risk remaining unfulfilled once again. The U.S. are still better positioned to foster regional diplomacy and solve local crises, but now more than ever there seems to be a hiatus between the strategy and goals conceived in Washington and the reality on the ground. Just as important, two decades of war fatigue have left little appetite for continuous engagement in a moment in which strategic priorities are perceived to be somewhere else.

In dealing with the region, thus, the Biden administration will have to balance between Wilsonian ambitions and Jeffersonian calls for restraint and domestic focus that the pandemic has certainly reinforced. Should we thus expect more special forces and drones for counterterrorism and outsourcing of diplomatic burdens to regional and, perhaps, European allies? Possibly, given that the current narrative in Washington seems to point in this direction. Nevertheless, it may be highly risky to push the Middle East into the background of the U.S. foreign policy radar and dismiss it as a secondary theatre just yet, since recent history shows us a quite different trend.