

Opinion: Is Biden normalizing Trump's foreign policy?

Opinion by Fareed Zakaria

Next week, on Sept. 21, President Biden will make his first speech to the U.N. General Assembly. This address comes at a crucial moment in the Biden presidency and will have a particular impact on how it is viewed abroad. After almost eight months of watching policies, rhetoric and crises, many foreign observers have been surprised — even shocked — to discover that, in area after area, Biden's foreign policy is a faithful continuation of Donald Trump's and a repudiation of Barack Obama's.

Some of this dismay is a consequence of the abrupt and unilateral manner in which Biden withdrew American troops from Afghanistan. A German diplomat told me that, in his view, Berlin was consulted more by the Trump administration than by this one. Some are specific actions, such as the submarine deal, which has enraged the French.

But the growing concerns go well beyond any one episode. A senior European diplomat noted that, in dealings with Washington on everything from vaccines to travel restrictions, the Biden policies were "'America First' in logic, whatever the rhetoric."

A Canadian politician said that if followed, Biden's "Buy America" plans are actually more protectionist than Trump's. Despite having criticized Trump's tariffs repeatedly, Biden has kept nearly all of them. (In fact, many have been expanded since most exemptions to them have been allowed to expire.) Key Asian allies keep pressing Biden to return to the Trans-Pacific Partnership — much praised by him when the Obama administration negotiated it. Instead, it has been shelved.

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Another striking example of Biden's surprisingly Trumpian foreign policy is the Iran deal, one of the landmark accomplishments of the Obama administration. Throughout his election campaign, Biden argued that Trump's withdrawal from that agreement had been a cardinal error and that, as president, he would rejoin it as long as Iran would also move into compliance. His national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, described Trump's reimposing of secondary sanctions against Tehran despite opposition from U.S. allies as "predatory unilateralism."

But since he took office, Biden has failed to return to the deal and has even extended some sanctions. Having long argued against trying to renegotiate the deal, Biden officials now want to "lengthen and strengthen" it. So far, this Trump-Biden strategy has not worked. Iran's stockpile of enriched uranium went from less than 300 kilograms in 2018 to more than 3,000 kilograms in May.

Or consider policy toward Cuba. The Obama administration was bold enough to tackle one of the most glaring failures in U.S. foreign policy. Having isolated and sanctioned Cuba since 1960 to produce regime change in that country, the United States had instead strengthened Cuba's Communist government. Fidel Castro sparked nationalist fervor by blaming all of Cuba's problems on the embargo and, far from being toppled, he ended up staying in power longer than any nonroyal leader on the planet.

As with Iran, the cost of these policies has been paid by ordinary people. One of the cruelest aspects of America's sanctions policy is that it is so readily deployed because it satisfies special interest groups in Washington and is painless to Americans, but inflicts horrific damage on the poorest and most powerless — millions of ordinary Cubans and Iranians — who have no way to protest or respond.

Obama began to relax these policies toward Cuba. Trump reversed course. Biden has kept in place the Trump policy and actually tightened sanctions. In a recent U.N. General Assembly vote condemning America's 60-year-old embargo, the vote was 184 to 2. (Israel was the only country to vote with Washington.)

Biden and his team often criticized Trump for his assault on the rules-based international system. But how does one rebuild such a system while embracing naked protectionism, unilateral sanctions, limited consultations and America First policies on vaccines and even travel?

When I was returning from Europe last week, the British airline employee checking me in said nervously, "I hope you have an American passport." I said yes but asked why she seemed so relieved. She replied, "Oh, the Americans have made it a nightmare for Europeans to enter their country. And it seems so unfair because we have much higher vaccination rates and much lower levels of covid than you do." She concluded in exasperation, "It seems that these days you Americans just want a double standard that helps you no matter what others think."

It doesn't have to be this way. Trump's selfishness should be the aberration. Biden can use the U.N. pulpit to return to his deep roots as an internationalist who understands that countries don't simply ally with America out of fear, bribes or narrow security concerns. They do so because its best presidents have articulated and pursued policies that, while always being attentive to U.S. interests, also tried to build an open, rules-based international order that helped others prosper and thrive. If Joe Biden continues his current course, though, historians might one day look back on him as the president who normalized Donald Trump's foreign policy.