

Biden's 'Reversals'

by George Friedman - January 25, 2021

Just about every U.S. president promises a new era of U.S. foreign policy. George W. Bush promised to abolish nation building as a goal. Barack Obama promised to make the world, and particularly the Muslim world, like America more. Donald Trump promised a foreign policy that benefited the United States. Joe Biden is promising a foreign policy that reverses the damage Trump did to all of America's foreign relationships. The operant principle is that the past was bad and the future will be good. And to be good, the bad must be reversed.

But policy represents only the wishes of leaders, not reality. Bush spent his two terms trying to build nations in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere. Jihadism failed to succumb to Obama's charms. Trump pursued U.S. interests but rarely defined what those interests were. All their intentions were real; the world is just not that compliant.

As an example of one of his first policy moves, Biden announced last week that he would cancel the Keystone XL pipeline, a \$50 billion project running from Canada to the United States. Trump approved the pipeline, which Canadians reasonably understood to be a done deal. The cancellation has left oil-rich Alberta province enraged, and even Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, with whom Alberta is often at odds, condemned the decision.

From Biden's perspective, the move makes sense. He says he is committed to environmental causes, and he sees the pipeline as a threat to the environment. Yet, it's curious insofar as he promised to roll back Trump's invocations of "America first." His first significant action, in other words, was to unilaterally abandon an agreement that is seen as critical to Canada, arguably one of Washington's closest allies. Canada has little recourse, other than to perhaps revise the U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement on issues that are dear to the United States.

Another example is Biden's commitment to reopening talks with Iran and resurrecting the nuclear agreement. Trump shelved the agreement, arguing that it did not provide either safeguards or guarantees against other Iranian actions such as special operations against Israel and the Persian Gulf states. Taking a much firmer stance, he imposed massive sanctions that have crippled Iran's economy.

It will be extremely difficult for Biden to revert to the previous agreement. Under Trump, the U.S.

fostered the Abraham Accords, whereby Sunni Arab states formally recognized Israel by establishing diplomatic ties. The driving force behind this agreement was a common fear of Iran. The Sunni Arab states around the Gulf were particularly vulnerable to Iranian machinations; Israel was fighting Iranian proxies directly in Syria and Lebanon. They did not trust Iran to live up to any nuclear agreement, even as they faced non-nuclear threats from Tehran. The return of the prior treaty without agreement on a cessation of hostile Iranian actions would run counter to the new alliance.

The Israeli-Sunni alliance has radically reshaped the Middle East. It was made possible by Israel and the UAE, but the U.S., which could have blocked it, strongly supported it. Any attempt to renew the Iran nuclear deal and abandon sanctions against Tehran without verifiable commitments by Iran to dial back the behavior its opponents object to is antithetical to this alliance. Iran will not agree to surrender its regional interests, and the alliance members will not agree to any treaty that ends sanctions and doesn't dramatically increase controls on Iran's nuclear program. Put simply, the agreement the Obama administration enacted was possible then. It isn't now.

Then there is Biden's commitment to repair the relationship between Europe and the United States. It is not clear what he means by this beyond ending boorish behavior at meetings. The only significant trans-Atlantic institution in existence is NATO. The U.S. has an agreement with other NATO members that each would maintain defense budgets equaling 2 percent of their gross domestic product. The U.S. has done this historically; most European nations have not. Does a better relationship include capitulating to Europe on this issue?

More important is the question of what exactly Europe and the U.S. are reconciling with. The United Kingdom is no longer part of the European Union and is asking for a free trade agreement with the United States. Does Biden's commitment to Europe include this key U.S. ally? Doing so could alienate other members of the EU. Do better relations include agreeing to Europe's position on digital taxes? Maybe, maybe not. Brussels is threatening Poland (and Hungary) with sanctions for what it regards as violations of the rule of law. How will that affect U.S. troops stationed there?

The United States and Europe have had intimate relations since the end of World War II. The coalition was built in part on the Soviet threat. In the 30 years since the fall of the Soviet Union, Europe has changed, becoming more insular, managing its economic system, and regarding military matters as secondary. If those are its priorities, then what does it mean to resurrect relations with Europe? What does the United States want from Europe, and what will Europe give in return? And what exactly is Europe without the U.K., or if Poland (and Hungary) are under threat from the bloc they voluntarily joined?

Biden has promised new and cooperative relations with the rest of the world. It is easy for a candidate to promise to do only the things everybody likes, but much harder for a president to actually do so. Biden is surrounded by officials with strong ties to old policies that no longer comport to the current world order, to ideologues who want actions regardless of cost, and to shifting realities that do not jibe with either. Presidents have honeymoons that end quickly. Biden is no different. He has made many promises he won't be able to keep, and he will be condemned for those promises he keeps and those that he doesn't.

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