

Obama, Trump and Biden: Consistency in Foreign Policy

by George Friedman - January 18, 2021

U.S. foreign policy comes in phases. From the end of World War II to 1972, its goal was to confront the Soviet Union and affiliated communist governments. Things changed a little in the early 1970s, when the U.S., weakened by the Vietnam War, began to work with China against the Soviet Union to eventually reach a detente. This lasted until 1991 and the collapse of the Soviet Union. From the early 1990s to 2001, Washington fixated on leading a global, peaceful world order. That, too, changed on 9/11, after which policy revolved around the global war on terror. The wars were costly and minimally effective.

The current phase of U.S. foreign policy was put into place by Barack Obama. It consisted of reducing military forces in the Middle East and creating a new relationship with the Muslim world; adopting a more adversarial stance on Russia, including Moscow's forays in its near abroad; and confronting China on trade relations and, specifically, Beijing's manipulation of its currency.

Donald Trump's foreign policy naturally followed. He also sought to withdraw troops from the Middle East and to create a new relationship in the region. He was instrumental in formalizing a coalition structure consisting of certain Arab nations and Israel against Iran, and made some unexpected troop withdrawals. He brought economic pressure on China, the effects of which remain to be seen. And finally, he continued to confront Russia, maintaining U.S. forces in Poland, Romania and the Black Sea.

There were, of course, many other dimensions of all their foreign policies, but these were the most definitive. Relations with Europe were a means to dealing with other issues, much as they had been since 1945. Relations with East Asia were similarly instrumental. But the key elements of the Obama-Trump foreign policy era was the withdrawal and restructuring of the Middle East, containing Russia and confronting China. The language, gestures and general atmosphere were different, but the reality was the same. They had no other choices. The Middle East was essential, and George W. Bush's foreign policy had run its course.

Joe Biden steps into the presidency with as few choices as Trump. The tone and tenor will be radically different, but the policy will not. Biden has suggested, for example, that he will adopt a more

conciliatory policy toward Iran. The problem is that the new architecture of the region consists of states fundamentally hostile to Iran, particularly its nuclear capabilities. They do not trust Iranian promises on this issue, because betrayal could be catastrophic to them. Biden cannot let the budding alliance structure fall apart, nor can it afford to go forward without a strong U.S. hand. Biden can say he wants to be more conciliatory to Iran, and he can be that, but he can do so only by proposing an alternative to the regional alliance created during the previous administration.

There is no indication that Biden intends to shift U.S. policy on Russia and China. And if he does, it will be in response to how China and Russia behave as he enters office. China could become conciliatory itself and acquiesce to American demands, or it could become more militarily aggressive first to test Biden and probe for weakness. How Biden reacts to either scenario will reshape U.S.-Chinese relations. The initiative is in China's hands, since the U.S. can hold its current positions. Likewise, Russia can continue to acquire strategic depth by creating informal realities in places like Belarus or the South Caucasus. But if so, the U.S. will have to modify – but not abandon – its containment policy. Just as the logic of the Obama era remained in place under Trump, so too will the Trump logic hold under Biden, adjusting to new realities and rhetoric. U.S. policy will continue to be focused on the new Middle East alignment, Russian containment and confrontation with China.

The promise to draw closer to global allies is praiseworthy until it's attempted. The U.S. can try to have warmer meetings with Europe, and the Europeans might choose to become more confrontational with China, but that will be because it is in their interest, not because it fits inside the parameters of what constitutes “normal diplomacy.” The interests of the U.S. and Europe don't usually collide, nor do they perfectly align. The Europeans tend to be risk averse, especially in places like Asia, where the U.S. can't afford to be lackadaisical. Everyone there is scared of China. A sudden reconciliation between China and the United States would be an earthquake.

Foreign policy evolves, but it evolves rapidly and dangerously. Biden is president, but his foreign policy, like that of all other presidents, will be surrounded by domestic turpitudes and so will seek predictability. (Oddly, Trump did as well, even when he appeared not to.) What Biden fears is that thing likely to come: a gut check from the Chinese, Russians or Iranians. If he is savvy enough, he will navigate them so that he can hold fast to the policies he inherited. That is the most likely scenario. Being innovative while being tested can have unexpected consequences.

Author: George Friedman
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