



Biden's Realism, US Restraint, and the Future of the Transatlantic Partnership

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RESEARCH



ABSTRACT

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan had been attempted by three US presidents. It reflected an interest in reorienting US global engagement to focus on the Indo-Pacific and to limit US military engagement in wars no longer perceived to be core to US vital interests. President Biden's personal commitment to withdrawing troops from Afghanistan also played an important role. While the exit from Afghanistan was undertaken in coordination with NATO, Biden's determination to withdraw US troops meant that America's key partners felt informed rather than consulted. But the end of America's global role was quickly overshadowed by new developments. A new strategic partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States was announced in September 2021, demonstrating that the US shift to the Indo-Pacific would be coordinated with key partners in Europe. But, the war in Ukraine confirmed the US role as a security provider in Europe, drove a renewed mutual commitment to the transatlantic partnership, and underscored the enduring significance of US global leadership.

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INTRODUCTION

The abrupt and chaotic withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan in August 2021 came as a dramatic shock to many across Europe and in the United States and appeared to threaten a grave rupture to the transatlantic partnership. But, the return of great power conflict hastened a return to transatlantic unity in the face of Russia's war in Ukraine. Additionally, the decision to withdraw US troops was in fact years in the making. President Biden's personal interest in withdrawing US troops from Afghanistan was well known and emerged more than a decade before the 2021 policy change. Biden was the third in a line of US presidents determined to reorient US policy to the Indo-Pacific, to rethink the role of the military in the Middle East, and to align America's military interventions with a careful evaluation of America's vital interests.

The US withdrawal was perceived by many to be directly at odds with two of President Biden's most important pledges: to renew American leadership and to secure and promote democracy and human rights in a world that his administration defined as a contest between democracies and autocracies. A new determination to exercise restraint in the use of military force, though, underscored the new US strategy and meant that diplomacy and other instruments would be deployed to achieve US foreign policy goals. The Biden strategy emphasized bilateral, multilateral, and regional partnerships, and a reliance on instruments, such as targeted sanctions, that did not involve the direct use of military force.

America's global standing had taken a hit during the Trump presidency, and the US's relationships with its closest partners had atrophied. China had become more assertive abroad and more authoritarian at home, and relations between China and the US had deteriorated markedly during Trump's residency and during the first year of the pandemic. The economic and health effects of the pandemic had a devastating impact in the US. Unemployment soared, and on January 7, 2021, less than two weeks before President Biden entered office, more than 4,000 Americans died of Covid.

At the time of Biden's inauguration, there was a sense of urgency, driven by the administration's heightened awareness of domestic discontent in the US and an ongoing effort by a radicalized Republican Party to derail Biden's agenda. The January 6 attacks on the Capitol had unsettled Americans and also America's closest partners. In Europe, the January 6 Capitol attacks were a shock but also a recognition of a changing US.

The decision to withdraw US troops from Afghanistan reflected the foundations of Biden's foreign policy doctrine: exercising restraint in the use of military force, limiting US military interventions to US vital national interests, and focusing US strategy on the Indo-Pacific. The final element would prove to be the most difficult to achieve.

But the January 6 attacks and, several months later, the rapid exit from Afghanistan spurred a renewed debate about European strategic autonomy and the need to guard against a US whose global role would continue to be unpredictable and uncertain.

MIDDLE EAST

For the Biden Administration, January 6 not only signalled a grave crisis for US democracy, it also underscored the fact that the crisis spurred by the pandemic would not produce an extended reprieve from internal divisions or create a basis for unifying Congress behind Biden's agenda. Instead, domestic politics would continue to disrupt the president's efforts to advance his policy agenda. The window for Biden to achieve his foreign policy goals was also likely to close quickly. History alone suggested the midterm elections would yield Republican gains in the House and Senate. But a highly polarized US electorate, a radicalized Republican Party, and a Democratic Party torn between its progressive and its moderate wing all combined to create an even greater constraint on the president's ability to deliver his climate agenda or his broader spending plans to build back better.

Even if Biden had faced an easier domestic climate, the US effort to reorient America's foreign policy to the Indo-Pacific would not have been easy. Previous presidents had tried, and failed, to do the same. Events had a way of undermining their efforts. The rise of ISIS drew Obama squarely back into the Middle East. President Trump initially found himself drawn further into

the Middle East and increased US troop commitments. Later, his decision to take the US out of the Iran Deal led to more, rather than less, US focus on responding to Iran's disruptive tactics in the region.

Where Trump had succeeded was in mobilizing US domestic support in opposition to China. Trump's rhetorical attacks were designed to blame America's economic plight, loss of manufacturing, and trade deficit on China. Trump even blamed China for the pandemic. During his presidency, a clear bipartisan consensus was forged around the need to take a tougher line on China. This helped pave the way for a strategic focus on China, even if Trump did not deliver on this goal and instead pursued a policy that was defined by tariffs.

By the time Biden was inaugurated, the strategic imperative to focus on China had become even more compelling. China now represented nearly 17% of the global GDP, a dramatic change from the 9% it held when Obama entered office. China's handling of the onset of the pandemic created an easy opportunity for President Trump, who used this to deflect attention away from his own poor handling of the US response to the pandemic and instead sought to mobilize Americans by further politicizing the origins of the pandemic. This led to strong anti-China sentiment in the US and a hardening of US public attitudes towards China. China's crackdown on Hong Kong and the adoption of a new national security law also contributed significantly to negative public opinion in the United States.

AFGHANISTAN

The history of US engagement in Afghanistan was the context for the decision to withdraw US troops. When President Biden took office, the US troop presence had been reduced to a core of around 2,500, but US troops had been in Afghanistan for nearly two decades. The aims of the intervention, which had evolved far beyond the original goals, were never entirely clear. A mission that had been started to defeat those responsible for the 9/11 terrorist attacks quickly expanded to include counterterrorism alongside a more comprehensive approach to nation building.

Despite some early success in defeating the Taliban, Bush, Obama, and Trump all tried and failed to withdraw US troops from the country. Biden not only inherited a different situation in Afghanistan, he also had a personal and longstanding commitment to withdrawing US troops from Afghanistan. As vice president he had been a far more vociferous opponent of US engagement and had clashed with other members of the administration on Afghanistan policy. In 2009, Biden was a vocal critic of the surge that saw 30,000 additional American troops sent to Afghanistan [1].

President Trump was also determined to achieve a deal with the Taliban during his first term. This determination later created a hard constraint on America's subsequent policy options in Afghanistan. Trump had negotiated and signed a deal with the Taliban that committed the US to withdraw its troops by February 2021. By talking directly with the Taliban, side-lining the Afghan government, and agreeing to a deal that set a firm timeline for a US withdrawal without conditions, Trump effectively set the Taliban's expectations. The Taliban were determined to wait for the US to withdraw its troops. Many policy makers in the US believed this gave the Taliban time to regroup so they could later renew violent attacks should the US fail to deliver on its pledge.

Trump's negotiations excluded the Afghan government, thereby emboldening the Taliban and weakening the Afghan government. But Trump's determination to announce a deal overrode any considerations for the future stability in Afghanistan.

This context informed President Biden's decision to withdraw US troops from Afghanistan, arguing that the status quo was not sustainable and that if US troops remained, the Taliban would use this to justify a rapid return to violence. This, he argued, would require the US to send more troops to maintain peace and stability. President Biden believed strongly that the status quo would not last. US troop commitment had dwindled to 2,500, and the US had taken no casualties, but Biden agreed with those who argued that the Taliban was merely waiting it out and that if the US broke its commitment to exit Afghanistan on the agreed timeline, the Taliban would renew its violent campaign to push the US and NATO to withdrawal. This would mean

the 2,500 troops the US maintained in Afghanistan would be woefully short of what would be required to maintain peace and stability, leaving the US with the difficult choice of exiting, facing sustained attacks, or increasing its troop commitments.

Expert opinion on how many additional troops would be needed varied. A report by the Afghanistan Study Group, convened by the US Institute of Peace, estimated that an additional 2,000 US troops would be required, taking the total to 4,500 troops. Biden anticipated, however, that future casualties would lead to the unravelling of public support for an ongoing presence in the country.

This was the backdrop to President Biden's decision: a strategic reorientation of America's global role, the personal views of a US President deeply opposed to a war that he felt had evolved far beyond its original objectives, and the inheritance of a conditions-free deadline for the US departure from Afghanistan. He was also under intense pressure at home as the pandemic continued. The country was highly divided on key issues, such as the economy and the pandemic. President Biden was faced with a stark choice: withdraw troops and risk a Taliban takeover or send more US troops and risk a quagmire and opposition at home.

EXIT

President Biden's determination to take US troops out of Afghanistan was delayed, but not altered, by his desire to work in coordination with NATO allies. This explained, in part, why he did not immediately announce this key foreign policy decision. Shortly after his inauguration, President Biden unveiled a series of foreign policy measures. Many of these were expected: the US would recommit to the Paris Accords and the World Health Organization (WHO) and take steps to rejoin the UN Human Rights Council. But the fate of US troops in Afghanistan was not on the list. Only after consulting with key NATO partners did the Biden Administration announce its decision to withdraw all troops from Afghanistan, with a deadline that was only slightly extended beyond that which was agreed in Doha.

CHAOS

Biden's careful consultation with US allies in the first months of his presidency peaked in June with a trip to the UK and Europe for meetings of the G7, NATO, and the EU, as well as a tense bilateral meeting with President Putin. This early summer high water mark for transatlantic cooperation contrasted dramatically with the effect the August withdrawal from Afghanistan unleashed not only on Afghanistan but also on the transatlantic relationship.

What began as a measured approach to a major foreign policy decision erupted into a chaotic withdrawal that left the US's key European partners feeling they had been informed rather than consulted. The situation rapidly unravelled, unleashing a crisis in Afghanistan not only for the Afghan people but also for the transatlantic partnership and for Joe Biden. The rapid descent into a blame game revealed a shocking absence of Western unity and led to proclamations by some that the American era was over and that America's credibility had been destroyed.

At home, the political debate oscillated between a first order question about whether the US should have stayed in Afghanistan and a series of second order issues about the intelligence that had informed this choice and the coordination among NATO allies and, especially, whether the US could have anticipated the collapse of the Afghan government and the rapid Taliban takeover. The failure to plan a more orderly exit of international citizens and Afghans who had supported the international presence unsettled nearly all of America's key partners in the region. Very quickly, though, it was disclosed that State Department officials were warned [2] that Kabul could collapse if US troops withdrew and that the CIA had knowledge of the Taliban's growing strength—all providing fodder to partisan division. Republican senators took aim at Democratic opponents [3], which further fuelled the conservative media's assault on the Biden administration. Early polls suggested that voters in the US split along partisan lines, with initial polling showing that 69% of Democrats and only 31% of Republicans supported the withdrawal [4].

A highly polarized and partisan political environment in the US, and a divided political class in the UK, did not help. The risk that the US—and the UK—would become engulfed by a

debate driven by partisan politics was very real. This made it more difficult to understand what drove the US exit from Afghanistan, especially whether the surprising speed of the Taliban's takeover revealed a failure of policy, a failure of intelligence, or some combination of the two.

ALLIES

The Biden Administration's determination to withdraw all troops had a dramatic and negative impact on its relationship with partners across Europe, perhaps especially with the UK. Debate in the UK Parliament during the chaotic and dangerous exit, centred on the UK's dependence on US power and capabilities and the reality that the UK was unable to act alone. In this case, the UK was clearly unable to maintain its presence in Afghanistan without US support. The contrast between US-UK coordination on Afghanistan stood in stark contrast to the portrayal of a strong and almost equal partnership during the UK's successful hosting of the G7, President Biden's visit to Cornwall, and, especially, the UK's leadership at COP26. In Europe, the perception that the US had failed to take consultation seriously unleashed a torrent of negative public opinion and elite concern that Europe risked dependence on an unreliable and unpredictable United States that cared little about Europe's own foreign policy commitments and values. This gave even further charge to a longstanding debate in the European Union about the need for strategic autonomy.

The paradox for US policy was that the longstanding view among the public that the US should end its direct engagement in what had become known as the 'forever wars' had recently abated. The decision to withdraw US troops was not driven by public opinion; the public had largely had recently abated and the US public had come to accept a limited troop presence in Afghanistan. The foreign policy community in Washington also revealed a lack of consensus and did not determine Biden's decision.

But the botched and chaotic withdrawal wreaked havoc on the president's approval ratings at home. It also alienated America's key European partners and cast a dark shadow over the transatlantic partnership, and appeared to threaten its very foundations. In the months that followed, Europeans seemed determined to renew their drive for strategic autonomy, and the UK, in the midst of a year of defining its independence from Europe and its identity as Global Britain, sought to maintain a distance from its closest security ally.

AFTERMATH

The chaotic and disruptive exit from Afghanistan also provoked a debate about the future of American leadership and the consequences for US credibility far beyond Afghanistan. Some argued that China and Russia would both draw the lesson that the US would not respond if they chose to pursue an aggressive policy in their own neighbourhoods. Others argued instead that, however chaotic, the US exit from Afghanistan actually underscored its commitment to reorient US policy to the Indo-Pacific, even if it also demonstrated that the United States would no longer commit to humanitarian interventions.

For America's NATO partners, the chaotic withdrawal led to a feeling that Europe's own values and interests mattered little to the broader US calculus and that the alliance would now be defined by the United States' alone. US power and interest would shift to the Indo-Pacific and Europe would be left in the lurch. Biden's determination led many Europeans to believe that Trump and Biden were not far apart on their basic foreign policy aspirations.

But subsequent events quickly recast the reality for Europe, and for the transatlantic partners. First, the announcement in September 2021 of the Australia-UK-US (AUKUS) partnership created a renewed sense of cooperation and shared purpose between the US and the UK. This came at the expense of France and suggested that the US would be single-minded in its foreign policy pursuits.

The fate of Afghanistan after the Taliban takeover grew increasingly dire over the winter as most of the population faced a grave humanitarian crisis. But the shadow it cast over the future of the transatlantic partnership was short. And Western unity in the face of Russia's

brutal invasion of Ukraine radically altered the equation. Within two weeks, the US and Europe united around one of the most extensive and hard-hitting sanctions regimes ever adopted and cooperated to ensure the transfer of lethal aid to Ukraine in its efforts to defend its territory and its people.

In the United States, the president's approval ratings suffered as a result of the widespread feeling that President Biden had botched the Afghanistan withdrawal and was responsible for inflation. But his response to the war in Ukraine drew strong, bipartisan support and seemed at least temporarily to create a sense of unity and moral purpose among the US electorate.

The Western response to Russia's violation of Ukraine's sovereignty, and its unleashing of a brutal war against Ukraine and Ukrainians, set the transatlantic partnership on a new course. High levels of unity between the US and its European partners seemed likely to persist in the face of grave uncertainty over Ukraine's future, a refugee crisis on a scale not seen since the Second World War, and prolonged insecurity in Europe. After only a few weeks of war in Ukraine, it became clear that the prism through which Biden's foreign policy would be judged had fundamentally changed. Americas' attention rapidly focused on Ukraine and the European security order. How this would impact American attitudes towards the exit from Afghanistan unclear, but it looked possible that Biden's determination to focus US strategy on vital national interests would be supported. As the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan deepened it remained unclear whether moral judgments of Biden's Afghan policy would return to the fore. But in the face of Russia's aggression, Europe's capacity for humanitarianism was set to come under considerable strain and to force difficult choices.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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