

America Needs a President

di Ross Douthat

Last week's column was devoted to uncertainties about how the next president would handle the deteriorating situation in Ukraine, where America's proxy and ally is slowly losing ground to Russia, while the United States seems trapped by its commitment to a maximal victory and unable to pivot to a strategy for peace.

One could argue that the Middle East suddenly presents the opposite situation for the United States: After the last two weeks of warmaking and targeted assassinations, the position of our closest ally seems suddenly more secure, while our enemies look weaker and more vulnerable. Israel is dealing blow after blow to Hezbollah and Iran's wider "axis of resistance," the Iranian response suggests profound limits to their capacities, and the regional balance of power looks worse for America's revisionist rivals than it did even a month ago.

Look deeper, though, and both the strategic deterioration in Eastern Europe and the strategic improvement in the Middle East have something important in common. In both cases, the American government has found itself stuck in a supporting role, unable to decide upon a clear self-interested policy, while a regional power that's officially dependent on us sets the agenda instead.

In Ukraine this is working out badly because the government in Kyiv overestimated its own capacities to win back territory in last year's counteroffensive. In the Middle East it's now working out better for U.S. interests because Israeli intelligence and the Israeli military have been demonstrating a remarkable capacity to disrupt, degrade and destroy their foes.

In neither case, though, does the world's most powerful country seem to have a real handle on the situation, a plan that it's executing or a clear means of setting and accomplishing its goals.

Or as The Wall Street Journal [reported](#) this week, as Israel takes the fight to Hezbollah, “the Biden administration increasingly resembles a spectator, with limited insight into what its closest Middle East ally is planning — and lessened influence over its decisions.”

Because Israel’s moves have been working, it’s easy for its friends to suggest that the diminution of U.S. influence is basically a good thing: *The Israelis know what they’re doing. Get the Biden administration hand-wringers out of the way.* But from the perspective of American interests, the sidelining of the White House is a big red flag even if you agree with every choice Benjamin Netanyahu’s government has made of late (and, obviously, an even bigger one if you don’t).

For one thing, there’s no guarantee that Israel’s choices will continue to work out: Today’s restoration of deterrence could become tomorrow’s overreach or quagmire. For another, America has global responsibilities, not just regional ones, and a widening war in the Middle East could be bad for the American position in Asia and Eastern Europe no matter its outcome for the immediate participants. If the United States can’t exert real leverage over countries that it arms and supports, a weakening Pax Americana will end up hostage to too many interests not our own.

Scenarios where great powers end up led around by their allies and clients are not historically unusual. But it’s hard to escape the impression that America’s current difficulties are linked to a very specific problem: the vacuum at the heart of this presidency, the slow fade of Joe Biden from the normal execution of his duties, the general uncertainty about who is actually making decisions in U.S. foreign policy.

This week Axios [documented](#) Biden’s disappearance from public life, noting that he “hasn’t scheduled public events in 43 of the 75 days since he dropped his re-election bid.” If you think he’s only ghosting campaign-style responsibilities while engaging fully in foreign policy, I have a bridge over the Potomac to sell you. The Journal story notes, for instance, that Biden hasn’t spoken to Netanyahu since Aug. 21. An indicator of their estrangement? No doubt. But surely also an indicator that we don’t really have a full-time president anymore.

Even if American foreign policy gets through the next three and a half months without any true disasters, just the challenges we face already make it clear that Biden should have resigned the presidency when he suspended his campaign. It would have clarified

where the buck stops, given Kamala Harris some political advantages as well as formal power, and supplied voters with more information, from a few months of her leadership, with which to make their choice for 2024.

It's too late for that now: A transfer of power just weeks before the election would be too chaotic and desperate looking to reasonably attempt. And yes, once we make it to the transfer, neither Harris nor Donald Trump are exactly reassuring successors. The crown of the American empire will remain somewhat hollow no matter who ends up wearing it.

But Biden in his last days remains a singular case, a distinctive kind of danger — since never before has the United States faced quite so many global strategic challenges with a president who isn't really there.