

How Biden's middle-path foreign policy went off course

di David Ignatius

President Joe Biden's challenge in foreign policy sounded deceptively simple four years ago. "We will repair our alliances and engage with the world once again," he promised [in his January 2021 inaugural address](#). "We will be a strong and trusted partner for peace, progress and security."

And Biden did those things. He revitalized a weak NATO alliance in Europe; he forged new partnerships in Asia with Australia, India, Japan and South Korea; he defended Ukraine against aggression without risking a direct conflict with Russia; and he stood steadfastly with Israel, even at great domestic political cost.

The puzzle of Biden's presidency is why, despite these undeniable achievements, it feels hollow at journey's end. I admire many of Biden's decisions and applaud his careful stewardship of America's interests. But even to a supporter like me, his foreign policy seems less than the sum of its parts. Biden defined America's purpose as protecting the "rules-based international order." But for all his laudable effort, I fear that he left it weaker rather than stronger.

What was missing in Biden's attempt to steer a steady course through four years of international turmoil? The answer goes to the core of his character: He was a consensus builder in a world that had turned adversarial; he was a defender of the status quo at a time when people at home and abroad were screaming for transformation; he sought normal order in a global system that had become dangerously aberrant. The things that were most admirable about him as an individual were sometimes counterproductive on the world stage.

In foreign policy, a president always faces three basic options in dealing with crisis: At the extreme ends are doing nothing or going all the way. But there's a prudent option in the middle that balances the stark all-or-nothing choice. Biden was an "Option 2"

leader — he tried to find the sweet spot between too much and too little. His presidency demonstrated the skills he developed over his long Senate career for compromise and solid, sensible policy. But it also showed the limits of that approach. To be fair, most of our modern presidents have shared this middle-option balancing quality — and you can argue that in the age of nuclear weapons, it's essential. But America's greatest leaders were defined by refusing compromise. George Washington risked everything on a revolution to establish "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." Abraham Lincoln steeled himself to wage a civil war "until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword." Franklin D. Roosevelt insisted on "unconditional surrender" by Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan.

Biden rejected such moral absolutes in foreign policy. He didn't use the "pay any price, bear any burden" rhetoric of intervention. As vice president, he had been skeptical about nation-building in Iraq, preferring to let the country devolve [into three federal components](#). And [he had argued](#), almost alone, in 2009 against deepening America's war in Afghanistan. He wanted to use American power, but carefully.

The war in Ukraine was a case study in the virtues and vices of Biden's approach. He authorized unprecedented [release of U.S. intelligence](#) to warn Europe and the West of Russian President Vladimir Putin's invasion plan. And his staff organized an astonishing pipeline to supply weapons to Kyiv in the early days of the war. But his policy was bounded by three goals that were in subtle contradiction.

Biden sought a Ukrainian victory over Russian aggression — but he also wanted to keep NATO out of the war and to avoid U.S. conflict with a nuclear-armed power. The last two goals were sensible — no president should impulsively risk nuclear war — but they impeded Ukraine's ability to defeat Putin. As the war ground on, and Ukraine began to bleed out, Biden held fast to the prudent ground between all and nothing.

Biden sought a middle course on the [Israel-Gaza war](#), too. He pushed Israel to limit Palestinian civilian casualties and provide more humanitarian assistance. But he felt a personal and political obligation to continue supplying weapons to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, a leader he mistrusted. Biden's team took on the thankless job

of mediation, seeking a hostage-release deal in Gaza and, more successfully, a ceasefire in Lebanon. U.S. military power backed Israel as it remade the Middle East. But Biden got little credit.

Biden's stance was correct, in my view. He prodded Israel to reduce the shocking civilian toll from its attacks, but he recognized that the fight against Hamas, Hezbollah and other Iranian proxies was just. Netanyahu, far from grateful, treated him like a political punching bag. A long-term cost was the credibility of America's idea of rules-based international order, which was mocked by Hamas's Oct. 7, 2023, attack and Israel's long war of revenge in Gaza.

China was a final test. Biden sought a position between full-on confrontation with Beijing and accommodation of its growing power. He sought to "manage competition," in the regular back-channel meetings that national security adviser Jake Sullivan held with his Chinese counterpart. It was sound policy, but it brought Biden little reward.

Biden has always believed that he is underestimated in foreign policy. [He fumed to reporters last week](#), "I know more world leaders than any one of you have ever met in your whole goddamn life." He's right. A half-dozen colleagues have told me Biden's clarity in the Situation Room belies the public caricature of a stumbling, semi-coherent old man. Like the famous crack about Richard Wagner's music, Biden's foreign policy has been better than it sounds.

We'll see an early test of Biden's legacy, as the man in the middle hands over power to the embodiment of the all-or-nothing approach. It's head-spinning to move from careful stewardship to a man who proclaims that he wants to buy Greenland, repossess the Panama Canal and rename the Gulf of Mexico.

[Donald Trump](#) has an overweening ambition that the cautious Biden probably never let himself dream. He wants to win the Nobel Peace Prize. The new president will turn the world upside down, blustering his way toward a global reassertion of American power and imposed peace. Maybe he'll get the big deals he's already touting. But my guess is that we'll miss Joe Biden's careful, measured approach sooner than we think.