

In Search of a Biden Doctrine

by Andrea Colli

Abstract: Alla ricerca di una dottrina Biden. – The article discusses the struggle of the Biden administration to establish its own foreign policy doctrine, casting light on the efforts undertaken to tackle the multiple challenges that the incoming President has faced in the first two years of his term.

Keywords: Biden Doctrine; US International Relations; Authoritarianism; Democracy; Foreign Policy.

1. A controversial start...

The Biden Presidency started with one of the most controversial foreign policy decisions taken by a leader just into office, i.e. the completion, in August 2021, of the withdrawal of the American military forces from Afghanistan, after more than 20 years – the longest war ever fought by the US.¹

The withdrawal, even if planned already under the Obama administration, was a controversial decision, which simultaneously consigned the battered country and its population to a bunch of Islamic fundamentalists,² and likely threw the area into the Chinese sphere of influence.

Needless to say, the decision had a violent impact on the public opinion, not only in the US. but even more worldwide, and particularly among the US. Allied powers, deeply afraid of a potential reignition of fundamentalist terrorism, and even more concerned about the eventual turn in America's foreign policy, towards (again) isolationist inspirations.³

2. ...with some rationale

¹ See https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/08/31/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-end-of-the-war-in-afghanistan/?utm_source=link.

² <https://www.nytimes.com/article/afghanistan-war-us.html>.

³ https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/withdrawal-from-afghanistan-forces-allies-and-adversaries-to-reconsider-americas-global-role/2021/08/17/2808ddbc-ff84-11eb-825d-01701f9ded64_story.html.

Not a great starting point for a presidency which openly emphasized its willingness to manifest a sharp discontinuity with the “Monroeism” or “principled realism” which had characterised the foreign policy of the precedent administration.⁴ The Afghan retreat gave to many commentators the impression of a foreign policy strategy following instead a line of continuity with the previous one. Put in another way, the returns in supporting global liberalism were progressively declining, and a comeback to the identification between foreign and national policy was the most advisable orientation.

To be honest, ongoing, mostly unforeseen, events were “conspiring” again the revival of the American globalism in foreign affairs. A few weeks after its settlement, the Biden administration was invested by the chaos following the rampant diffusion of the COVID-19 pandemic, which created enormous internal problems, in economic and social terms, coupled with a galloping inflation. This was probably enough to persuade even the most internationalist administration that this was time to focus on the domestic emergency, first and foremost.

3. The “delayed” Doctrine

It is therefore not surprising that the concept itself of a “Biden Doctrine” in foreign policy was initially surrounded by scepticism and criticism, for the simple reason that its contours remained blurred and far from being clearly understandable. In June 2021, a couple of months before the announcement of the troops retreat from Afghanistan, *Politico*, the German-owned magazine aggressively titled an article analysing Biden’s foreign policy strategy “The never-ending, ever-frustrating hunt for a Biden Doctrine”.⁵

This was a dry, sharp critique of the Democratic administration’s approach to foreign relations; the article openly blamed the absence, or better the vagueness of a clearly defined strategy. This was subtly suggested to be in a line of continuity with that pursued by the Obama administration, equally vague in its “moral multilateralism” (or, put in the Obama’s own words, “don’t do stupid shit”).⁶

4. A mounting criticism

That of *Politico* wasn’t the sole critical voice. With a much less aggressive, but equally assertive tone, *The Economist* reiterated, from the other side of the Atlantic and from the European perspective, the weakness of a clearly shaped US. strategy in international relations. An article published in September, 2021 in the Lexington column, “A Biden Doctrine has still to

⁴ See M. Anton, *The Trump Doctrine*, in *Foreign Policy*, Spring 2019.

⁵ See N. Toosi, *The never-ending, ever-frustrating hunt for a Biden Doctrine*, in *Politico* 06/07/2021, retrievable at: <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/06/07/biden-Docctrine-foreign-policy-492019>.

⁶ See D. Rothkopf, *Obama Don’t Do Stupid Shit Foreign Policy*, in *Foreign Policy*, June 2014. Retrievable at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/06/04/obamas-dont-do-stupid-shit-foreign-policy/>.

emerge: beware those who claim otherwise”⁷ echoed the opinion expressed by Jeremy Shapiro, in the authoritative magazine *Foreign Affairs*. The research director of the European Council on Foreign Relations labelled Biden’s strategy in foreign policy as an “everything Doctrine”, emphasizing the difficulties of the new Democratic administration in designing a foreign policy balancing internationalism with domestic interests, since “(...) voters will not reward a Biden’s foreign policy that meddles in distant problems in the name of US. global leadership, while appearing to neglect issues at home”.⁸

Internationalism, however, could not easily be erased from Biden’s foreign policy agenda, which after all carried in itself the tradition of all the precedent democratic presidencies. Quoting British PM Harold McMillan, foreign policy strategies and doctrines are after all determined by “events”. And events taking place on the global scenario finally added further articulation to Biden’s foreign policy orientation, shaping it finally into a “doctrine”.

5. An “emerging” Doctrine

In the same June 2021, when *Politico* expressed its open doubts about the existence of a “Biden Doctrine”, a new analysis of the Democratic administration’s orientation in international relations appeared in *Foreign Affairs*: “The Emerging Biden Doctrine”, with a quite effective subtitle, “Democracy, Autocracy and the Defining Clash of Our Time”.⁹ The article made a great effort in defining the “events” which were at the origin of the emerging strategies of the administration in foreign policy matters, under the semblance of three radical “threats”.¹⁰

A) The challenge to democratic political regimes brought by non-democratic, authoritarian rule.

B) The ongoing impact of transnational problems as the COVID-19 emergency, and international corruption, allowing authoritarian regimes to further amplify their challenge to established democracies.

⁷ *A Biden Doctrine has still to emerge: beware those who claim otherwise*, in *The Economist*, 18 April 2021. Retrievable at <https://www.economist.com/united-states/2021/09/18/the-biden-Docctrine-has-yet-to-emerge-beware-those-who-claim-otherwise>.

⁸ See J. Shapiro, *Biden’s Everything Doctrine. The Mantle of Global Leadership Doesn’t Fit a Foreign Policy for the Middle Class*, in *Foreign Affairs*, April 22, 2021. Retrievable at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-04-22/bidens-everything-Docctrine>.

⁹ See H. Brands, *The Emerging Biden Doctrine. Democracy, Autocracy and the Defining Clash of Our Time*, in *Foreign Affairs*, June 2021. Retrievable at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-06-29/emerging-biden-Docctrine>.

¹⁰ See on the same line of thought A. Cooley, D.H. Nexon, *The Real Crisis of Global Order. Illiberalism on the Rise*, in *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2022. Retrievable at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2021-12-14/illiberalism-real-crisis-global-order>.

C) The tendency of even established democracies to undermine themselves, when they do not grant welfare, safety and equality particularly to the middle class.

These three “threats” have contributed to progressively craft the emerging “grand strategy” of the Biden administration in dealing with foreign affairs, something close to what one could rightly name a “Doctrine”.

Concerning A), the Doctrine conceives the great powers competition not (quite differently from what thought former President Trump) as a struggle for economic primacy, but an increasingly defined clash between opposites ideological visions of the World’s political order, between authoritarian and democratic forms of government. In this sense, this section of the “Doctrine” is by many commentators put in close connection and continuity with the Kennan-Truman idea of “containment”.¹¹ The duty of established democracies, even seeking alliance with the weaker ones (see for instance the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or QUAD), is to contain the spread of the dangerous idea that liberalism is intrinsically less efficient than illiberal government in delivering welfare and security to citizens.

As far as point B) this is increasingly translated into the strategy of strengthening alliances and partnerships, as for instance the North-Atlantic one. The impact of NATO, and its relevance in terms of “containment”, is now deploying its effects in coincidence with the Russian-Ukrainian crisis, which has given to this second pillar of the Biden Doctrine a chance to show of its effectiveness.

Concerning point C), actions in foreign policy must be implemented with America’s middle class in mind. Once considered vague and rather inconsistent (see above, footnote 8), the economic policy for the domestic middle class has been recently made much more concrete with, for instance, multibillion-dollars programs aiming at reshoring of US. activities once located abroad, particularly in high-tech industries as for instance that of semiconductors.¹² Simultaneously, this strategy aims at re-establishing the US. leadership in strategic sectors, restoring competences and human capital, while at the same time applying a peculiar form of technological containment, in this case openly targeting the Chinese strategy of civilian-military fusion.¹³

6. Concluding remarks

¹¹ See D. Adnensik, *Biden Revives the Truman Doctrine. His call to wage a global war for freedom echoes the dawn of the Cold War*, in *Foreign Policy*, March 29, 2021. Retrievable at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/03/29/biden-truman-Doctrine-russia-china-national-security-strategic-guidance-global-fight-freedom/>.

¹² See *Joe Biden attempts the bigger overhaul of America’s economy in decades*, in *The Economist*, October 27, 2022 retrievable at <https://www.economist.com/briefing/2022/10/27/joe-biden-attempts-the-biggest-overhaul-of-americas-economy-in-decades>.

¹³ About the Chinese civilian military fusion strategy, see the brief of the Department of State, retrievable at: <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/What-is-MCF-One-Pager.pdf>.

The Biden's Doctrine is finally taking a clearer shape. It is based on three pillars: contrast autocracies, strengthen, restore and revamp alliances, implement foreign actions with direct impact on the middle class.¹⁴ Most of this has been very recently enshrined into the National Security Strategy roadmap of the Biden-Harris administration, published on October 12, 2022.¹⁵ Particularly effective is the formulation of the first three sections of the document: Part I "The Competition for What Comes Next" (that is democracy vs. autocracy), Part II "Investing in Our Strength" (that is, investing in domestic human capital, or "our people", as the NSS puts it), Part III "Our Global Priorities" (that is, contrast China and Russia and enhance the collaboration with allies on key transnational priorities as climate change, security, terrorism, pandemics, and several others).

Notwithstanding the NSS recent release, however, the key question surrounding this Doctrine (emerging or already in place) is if it still misses a focus, and if still it is to some extent contradictory, in its intrinsic broadness. Not by chance the above-mentioned Shapiro's commentary (see footnote 8) carried a quite pessimistic subtitle, "The Mantle of Global Leadership Doesn't Fit a Foreign Policy for the Middle Class". For sure, after more than a year and half since the elections, this still holds true. Let's see if the force of the "events", which are (unfortunately) continuing to unfold on the Eurasian and Pacific scenario, will contribute to further refining what may be probably better called a "Infant Biden Doctrine".

Andrea Colli
Dipartimento di Scienze Sociali e Politiche
Università Bocconi
andrea.colli@unibocconi.it

¹⁴ See for a comprehensive vision of the relationship between "Bidenomics" and the administration's foreign policy the recent article *Joe Biden attempts the biggest overhaul of America's economy in decades*, in *The Economist*, 29 October 2022. Retrievable at <https://www.economist.com/briefing/2022/10/27/joe-biden-attempts-the-biggest-overhaul-of-americas-economy-in-decades>.

¹⁵ See The White House, *National Security Strategy*, October 2022. Retrievable at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>

