

# The Biden Doctrine: A Contemporary Analysis of U.S. Foreign Policy

di Andrea Colli

**Abstract:** *La dottrina Biden: un'analisi contemporanea della politica estera degli USA* - This article focuses on the analysis of the Biden Presidency and examines its approach to U.S. foreign Policy. More specifically, it starts from the acknowledgment of what were US doctrines in international relations historically and then continues on the specific approach undertaken by President Biden during its presidency. In its conclusion, the article highlights the main challenges that future presidencies will face.

**Keywords:** Biden Presidency, International Relations, United States, China.

## 1. Introduction

During the 1992 presidential contest, Bill Clinton's advisor James Carville famously stated, "It's the economy, stupid."<sup>1</sup> This phrase underscored the pivotal role that economic conditions play in shaping electoral outcomes in the United States. However, while the economy remains a significant concern for voters, the posture of a presidential administration in international affairs cannot be dismissed as irrelevant. A coherent foreign policy doctrine is essential for any administration, particularly in the contemporary global landscape. These brief notes aim at exploring the contours of what can be defined as the "Biden Doctrine", assessing its historical context, strategic pillars, and the implementation of tactics in the framework of U.S. foreign policy.

## 2. Understanding "Doctrines" in International Relations

The concept of a "doctrine" in international relations refers to a broad vision of a country's stance within the evolving global order. Historians and political scientists have long debated the precise definition of a doctrine. However, certain characteristics remain universally acknowledged: a doctrine is developed autonomously, carries implications for both major and

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<sup>1</sup> The episode is quoted in J. Friedman, A. Payne, *The Myth That Foreign Policy doesn't Matter in Presidential Elections. Details Might Not Matter, but Voters Care About Projecting Strength*, *Foreign Affairs*, October 8, 2024.

minor powers, responds to external challenges, and is intricately linked to national security, as famously highlighted by Henry Kissinger.<sup>2</sup>

Historically, U.S. doctrines have varied in coherence and clarity. For instance, in the early Nineteenth century the Monroe Doctrine established a very clear policy of isolationism and hegemony for the US. on the American Continent, while the Truman Doctrine was sharply focused on containment during the Cold War. In contrast, recent administrations, such as Obama's and Trump's, exhibited less coherent approaches, given also the much more instable international framework. Thus, to evaluate the Biden Doctrine effectively, we must examine its foundational components, including historical context, strategic pillars, tactical implementation, and legacies from previous policies.

### 3. The Components of the Biden Doctrine

#### 3.1 Historical Context

The Biden Doctrine emerges against the backdrop of a significant shift from unipolarity to a multipolar world. This transition is characterized by a resurgence of geopolitical competition among great powers, prompting a more assertive U.S. foreign policy.<sup>3</sup> American citizens, however, do increasingly exhibit a widespread sense of reluctance towards international engagement, reflecting a complex public sentiment toward global affairs.

#### 3.2 Main Strategy

Biden's primary strategy emphasizes direct confrontation with authoritarian regimes, positioning the U.S. as a defender of democracy against autocracy.<sup>4</sup> This approach marked since the beginning a stark departure from Trump's isolationist policies, signifying a renewed commitment to international alliances and multilateralism.<sup>5</sup>

#### 3.3 Tactics of Implementation

To actualize this grand strategy, Biden has pursued several tactical initiatives. One key tactic involves building and strengthening alliances with like-minded nations, exemplified by the formation of coalitions such as QUAD and AUKUS. In a sharp discontinuity with his predecessor, this has meant a different attitude towards institutions of global governance, as the United Nations, and existing multilateral alliances, NATO in first place.

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<sup>2</sup> H. Kissinger, *Foreign Policy and National Security*, 1(1) *Int. Secur.* 182 (1976).

<sup>3</sup> W.R. Mead, *The Return of Geopolitics: The Revenge of the Revisionist Powers*, 93(3) *Foreign Affairs* 69-74, 75-79 (2024).

<sup>4</sup> D. Kim, *The Biden Doctrine and China's response*, 26(2) *Int. Area Stud. Rev.* 107 (2023).

<sup>5</sup> J. Mathews, *What Was the Biden Doctrine? Leadership Without Hegemony*, *Foreign Affairs*, Sept./Oct., 2024; R. Gramer, *Biden's 'Coalitions of the Willing' Foreign-Policy Doctrine. The latest flurry of U.S. diplomacy shows how the president is all about "minilateralism"*, *Foreign Policy*, April 11, 2024.

Additionally, the Biden administration has focused on transforming economic blocks into strategically oriented alliances, contrasting sharply with the previous administration's approach.<sup>6</sup> Another crucial tactic is the concept of "Strategic Risk Reduction," aimed at minimizing military escalation while maintaining robust support for allies. This approach is evident in Biden's careful management of U.S. assistance to Ukraine amid the ongoing Russian invasion and the administration's handling of tensions with China regarding Taiwan.

### 3.4 Legacies of Past Doctrines

A thorough understanding of the Biden Doctrine necessitates acknowledgment of historical legacies. Past doctrines, particularly regarding U.S. involvement in the Middle East,<sup>7</sup> continue to influence current policies. The complexities of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and U.S. responses to regional instability remain critical components of Biden's foreign policy landscape.<sup>8</sup>

### 3.5 Fine-Tuning Strategies

Effective doctrines require flexibility to adapt to changing circumstances. Biden's administration demonstrates this adaptability by forming alliances with quasi-democratic regimes, such as India under Modi, and engaging in negotiations with authoritarian states like Iran concerning nuclear capabilities. These examples illustrate quite well the disconnection that can arise between ends and means in foreign policy.

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### 3.6 Consequences of the Biden Doctrine

The Biden administration's approach to China's containment has yielded mixed results. While the strategy aimed at limiting China's influence has been systematically pursued, it has also led to unintended consequences, such as accelerating China's advancements in key technological sectors like semiconductors. Furthermore, Biden's foreign policy has significant implications for domestic economic policies, as seen in initiatives like the Inflation Reduction Act and the Chips Act.<sup>9</sup>

## 4. Case Study: China

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<sup>6</sup> J. Mathews, *What Was the Biden Doctrine?*, cit.

<sup>7</sup> S. Cook, *The 'Biden Doctrine' Will Make Things Worse*, *Foreign Policy*, April 9, 2024.

<sup>8</sup> J. El-Gamal, *The failures of Joe Biden's foreign policy In the Middle East, the US has once again confused military might with strategic vision*, *The New Statesman*, Feb. 7, 2024.; J. Mathews, *What Was the Biden Doctrine?*, cit.; L. Selingman, V. Bergengruen, *Biden Sidelined as Israel Reshapes Middle East*, *The Wall Street Journal*, Oct. 4, 2024.

<sup>9</sup> B. Rhodes, *A Foreign Policy for the World as It Is. Biden and the Search for a New American Strategy*, *Foreign Affairs*, July, Aug. 2024.

The U.S. strategy towards China embodies a complex interplay of geopolitical and military considerations. Geopolitically, the focus remains on safeguarding U.S. interests in the Pacific region, ensuring that no single power dominates. This perspective necessitates a careful balancing act in responding to China's military buildup, reflecting a broader commitment to maintaining regional stability and deterring aggression,<sup>10</sup> which will be probably a constant component of the next Administration, whichever will be its identity.<sup>11</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

In summary, an evaluation of the Biden Doctrine reveals a multifaceted approach to U.S. foreign policy. While challenges persist, particularly regarding the effectiveness of strategies towards China and the Middle East, Biden's administration has made notable strides in revitalizing multilateralism and addressing authoritarianism on the global stage. The mixed results of Biden's foreign policy - sometimes harshly criticized by field experts<sup>12</sup> - underscore the complexities of contemporary international relations, demanding ongoing assessment and adaptation to navigate an increasingly multipolar world, and cast more than one doubt on the linearity on an eventual future Harris administration, which will have to be active on a number of new fronts, including that of AI and its overall impacts as strategic threat,<sup>13</sup> maybe introducing some discontinuities in Biden's original "grand strategy" mentioned above.<sup>14</sup> An equally possible second Trump administration (while these notes are written, the polls are predicting a slight majority for the Republican frontrunner) sheds an even more uncertain light over the next future of US. foreign policy.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> R. Schriver, D. Blumenthal, J. Young, *The President Needs to Lead the Cold War on China. A comprehensive economic strategy can forestall Beijing*, *Foreign Policy*, Jun. 17, 2024.

<sup>11</sup> N. Schladow, *How America Can Regain Its Edge in Great-Power Competition A Second Trump Term Would Require a New Strategy*, *Foreign Affairs*, Oct. 9, 2024.

<sup>12</sup> See for instance C. Dueck, *The Biden Doctrine. If the question is whether the US has a tightly coordinated, effective approach where the ends are appropriate, and the means are carefully built up to match the ends, then clearly the answer is no*, *The Caravan*, Hoover Institution, Mar. 5, 2024; P. Poast, *There Was No Biden Doctrine. That's the point*, *World Politics Review*, Aug. 2, 2024.

<sup>13</sup> *How to decode Kamala Harris's foreign policy. Expect tougher words on Israel, and continuity on Russia and China*, *The Economist*, Jul. 24, 2024; *The Kamala Harris Doctrine everything we know about the presumptive Democratic nominee's foreign-policy views*, *Foreign Policy*, Jul. 26, 2024; J. Hirsch, *Kamala Harris's 21st-Century Foreign Policy She learned a lot from President Joe Biden but forged her own path on tech Threats*, *Foreign Policy*, Aug. 23, 2024; E. Ashford, M. Kroenig, *Does Harris Have a Foreign Policy? The Democratic National Convention did not shed much light on what a Harris administration's global outlook would be*, *Foreign Policy*, Aug. 30, 2024.

<sup>14</sup> K. Moryasu, *Harris foreign policy spotlights international order, rules and norms. VP downplays 'democracy vs. autocracy' framing, which was unpopular in Asia*, *Nikkei Asia*, Oct. 3, 2024.

<sup>15</sup> *How to predict Donald Trump's foreign policy. He may be inconsistent, but his advisers offer some clues*, *The Economist*, Mar. 27, 2024.

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