



CANADIAN GLOBAL AFFAIRS INSTITUTE
INSTITUT CANADIEN DES AFFAIRES MONDIALES

The Next Chapter in ‘America First’ Doctrine: The Joe Biden Era

by David Carment and Dani Belo
March 2021

POLICY PERSPECTIVE

THE NEXT CHAPTER IN THE ‘AMERICA FIRST’ DOCTRINE: THE JOE BIDEN ERA

by David Carment, CGAI Fellow and Dani Belo

March 2021



CANADIAN GLOBAL AFFAIRS INSTITUTE
INSTITUT CANADIEN DES AFFAIRES MONDIALES

Prepared for the Canadian Global Affairs Institute
1800, 150 – 9th Avenue S.W., Calgary, AB T2P 3H9
www.cgai.ca

©2021 Canadian Global Affairs Institute
ISBN: 978-1-77397-180-3



With the election of Joe Biden in November 2020, many in the international community [breathed a sigh of relief](#). There was [hope from Canada and other Western powers](#) that Donald Trump's departure would usher in a fresh foreign policy perspective from a Washington focused on [positive re-engagement with global allies](#), an [emphasis on reinvigorating international institutions and strengthened support for a rules-based system](#). In his call with German Chancellor Angela Merkel on January 25, 2021, Biden expressed his intent to "[revitalize the transatlantic alliance](#)" through NATO and closer co-operation with the EU.

Biden went even further by proposing a re-energized [alliance of values under U.S. leadership](#) to address global challenges, specifically China's and Russia's increasing influence. Indeed, Biden's speech at the Copenhagen Democracy Summit in June 2020 foreshadowed his presidential foreign policy agenda to [unite global democracies against common illiberal adversaries](#).

However, Biden's speech to Department of State staff indicated that U.S. strategic thinking continues to be [bound by a deep-rooted preoccupation with relative gains](#). Such considerations motivate Washington to use political, economic and other coercive tools and tactics, commonly associated with [grey-zone conflicts](#), to punish adversaries and "discipline" global allies.

The protracted political, economic and other pressure tools deployed [against allies in Europe](#) to get them to comply with U.S. priorities have carved a deep rift between Washington and its global partners. The "democratic alliance" agenda cannot easily repair the [transatlantic rift](#) or compel Western European governments to march in line with the U.S.

America's allies are charting a course that delivers benefits from a transformed economic order driven by a Chinese economy that is poised to [overtake the U.S. by the end of this](#) decade. Bloc wars remain for them an unappealing artifact of 50 years of American power that has been increasingly [operationalized through unilateralism and competitive multilateralism](#). Washington's grey-zone strategies will continue to place allies in an increasingly difficult position.

U.S. success during the Cold War may [have been built on compelling democratic values](#) and support for human rights, but today the ideologies of the Cold War and the brief unipolar moment that followed it, are no longer top of mind for many of America's allies, let alone much of the world. Given plenty of politically diverse, economically prosperous and militarily capable partners from which to choose, national priorities are changing. Commercial sustainability, economic vitality and diplomatic engagement are driving the global agenda, not U.S. hegemony.

Notwithstanding the soft-power intimations inherent in Biden's agenda, he is still very much focused on an "America First" doctrine, as reflected in those controversial policies which many regard as [weaponized forms of extraterritoriality](#). Though Biden's rhetoric may not appear as blunt, these policies encapsulate the key features of America's [entrenched strategic culture of exceptionalism](#) and will continue to make life tough for those countries that have their own economic and political agendas.



The real test for Biden will be the extent to which he dismantles many of Trump's executive orders and reverses the disturbing and increasing trend towards defining coercive diplomacy and sanctions against other states in terms of "national emergencies". It is important to note the words of one of America's greatest Supreme Court justices, Robert H. Jackson, who believed U.S. foreign policy is ultimately always political. Once judicial opinion rationalizes an order such as a "national emergency" to show that it conforms to the Constitution, or more specifically, rationalizes the principle, "[The principle then lies about like a loaded weapon, ready for the hand of any authority that can bring forward a plausible claim of an urgent need. Every repetition imbeds that principle more deeply in our law and thinking, and expands it to new purposes.](#)"

Biden has already altered course on several Trump policies regarding U.S. participation in the global climate change agenda and rejoining the World Health Organization (WHO). But these reversals were strategic in nature, not value driven. Indeed, in Biden's own words, his goal is to [re-establish American leadership](#) in those areas which risk being dominated, if not controlled, by China. But there are other crucial Trump-era policies that remain in place, including the [National Defense Authorization Act](#) (NDAA), the [Protecting Europe's Energy Security Clarification Act](#) (PEESCA) and the [Countering America's Adversaries Abroad Through Sanctions Act](#) (CAATSA).

The now-controversial CAATSA list is instructive in regards to its unintended consequences. In essence, the act seeks to [punish those who buy arms from America's adversaries](#), most notably Russia. Yet CAATSA has not prevented both [Turkey](#), a NATO ally, and [India](#), also an ally, from purchasing advanced Russian weapons systems such as the S400 missile. Both countries face sanctions from the U.S. for stepping out of line.

The reality is U.S. diplomacy cannot thrive in an environment where the threat to do harm to allies constantly looms in the background. While Canada may be considered safely on America's side because of its deep dependence on U.S. arms sales and defence, it is not clear other countries are.

As Ian Storey, a senior fellow at Singapore's ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, [wrote](#): "Washington's efforts to curb Moscow's global arms sales may have the unintended effect of obstructing some Southeast Asian countries' attempts to resist Beijing's relentless advances; they may even enhance China's influence ..."

[According to others](#), the CAATSA process might actually impede countries from building a defence relationship with the United States, if only to avoid future compromises to their strategic autonomy. The American research group Stratfor says: "In today's world, middle powers are increasingly assertive and refuse to tie themselves to any single great power. The United States' reliance on the blunt tool of extraterritoriality could eventually backfire if it's not careful."

For example, the European Commission [has negotiated](#) a major investment treaty with China amid punishing American sanctions that harm 12 EU nations and 120 European companies. Those sanctions are embedded deep in the "America First" agenda as part of the NDAA and PEESCA. To date, the Biden administration's support for the elimination of the Nord Stream II pipeline project between Russia and Germany remains resolute.



This unwavering stance has not only deepened the political rift between the U.S. and its European partners, it is the wedge that stands in the way of increased Russian-European co-operation. A Russia working amicably with Europe would render the U.S. security measures extraneous, along with a complex and extremely expensive defence and security architecture. The EU has declared American [sanctions illegal](#), decrying U.S. extraterritoriality as an abuse of power.

Despite Biden's pleasantries with key European leaders like Angela Merkel, [skepticism regarding Washington's future intentions](#) and a [hardening of Germany's support](#) for Nord Stream II remain. Pessimism was also noted by Clément Beaune, France's minister for Europe, who predicted that [U.S foreign policy will remain unchanged](#) in relation to Europe after Trump. This has largely been confirmed. French President Emmanuel Macron is pressing ahead with a European defence and security policy that frees itself of U.S. influence.

Clearly, the common democratic values agenda is not sufficiently coherent to mend the gap in priorities between Washington and Western European capitals. The poisoning and imprisonment of Russian opposition leader Alexey Navalny has [not derailed the Nord Stream II project](#) as some expected it would, nor has it mobilized a common response by like-minded democracies.

Biden's vision of a democratic alliance also did not compel U.S allies to abandon their [commitment to the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership \(RCEP\)](#) signed in November 2020 without Washington, or join the U.S. [sanctions against the China National Offshore Oil Corporation \(CNOOC\)](#). Rather, Washington's willingness to deploy political and economic pressure to punish allies empowered governments in Europe and Asia to co-operate with Beijing.

Support for democracy is a virtue, but disentangling issues is important to reap maximum benefits in contemporary global affairs. For example, those who were able to co-operate across geopolitical axes during the COVID-19 pandemic ensured their own survival in the crisis. Smaller states like Serbia and Hungary enabled high rates of vaccination because they [received supplies from Western Europe and Russia](#). On the other hand, for countries like Ukraine, the priority to vaccinate was overshadowed by the political rift with Moscow and revelations that vaccines were [smuggled from Israel](#). Ukraine is waiting for its [vaccine supply from China](#).

Biden's democratic alliance agenda has the potential to escalate the conflict in Eastern Ukraine. With a [dire economic situation, poor government performance](#) and [growing political infighting](#) among elites, Kyiv is grasping for renewed political, economic and military support from the U.S. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky enthusiastically jumped on the democracy-promotion bandwagon by [reminding the Biden administration](#) that Ukraine is the "largest democracy in the post-Soviet region" and thus, a key U.S. ally. Following a period of freeze and neglect by Berlin and Washington, the conflict in Eastern Ukraine [has recently been escalating](#), according to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe's (OSCE) special monitoring mission for Ukraine. Moreover, the increased fighting conveniently coincided with the arrival of the new administration in the White House. Such an escalation may attract limited support from Washington to temporarily mask the deep-rooted domestic economic and political challenges in Ukraine, but it will come at the expense of more human lives.



Kyiv's eagerness to support Biden's democratic alliance agenda is a paradox in the face of Ukraine's recent [suppression of opposition media](#). On February 2, 2021 Ukrainian TV channels NewsOne, Channel 112 and ZIK, owned by opposition MP Taras Kozak, were subjected to sanctions and forced to close. The Kyiv government claimed that the media platforms were linked to pro-Russia politician Viktor Medvedchuk. Zelensky [defended the decision](#) as part of the "fight against the danger of Russian aggression in the information arena". However, the sanctions were imposed [without proof](#) of the above entities' involvement in "terrorism" or support for the separatist regions. The U.S embassy in Kyiv [supported the decision](#), while the [EU cautioned](#) against such undemocratic solutions.

For Canada, the sad reality is that we are caught up in the "America First" agenda as much as anyone. For example, while not surprising, with the revocation of a construction permit for the Keystone XL pipeline on his first day as president, Biden made [Canada the first target](#) of the America First agenda. Disregarding the interests of businesses and communities on both sides of the border, the move was not inherently anti-Canadian as much as it was driven by various forces within the U.S. who saw no merit in the pipeline. The Keystone decision did not reflect an alliance of democracies working together to confront a common enemy. It was cold, hard self-interest, and Canada blinked.

► About the Author

David Carment is a full Professor of International Affairs at the Norman Paterson School of International Affairs, Carleton University and Fellow of the Canadian Global Affairs Institute (CGAI). He is also a NATO Fellow and listed in *Who's Who in International Affairs*. In addition Professor Carment serves as the principal investigator for the Country Indicators for Foreign Policy project (CIFP).

Professor Carment has served as Director of the Centre for Security and Defence Studies at Carleton University and is the recipient of a Carleton Graduate Student's teaching excellence award, SSHRC fellowships and research awards, Carleton University's research achievement award, and a Petro-Canada Young Innovator Award. Professor Carment has held fellowships at the Kennedy School, Harvard and the Hoover Institution, Stanford, and currently heads a team of researchers that evaluates policy effectiveness in failed and fragile states (see *Country Indicators for Foreign Policy*). Recent publications on these topics appear in the *Harvard International Review* and the *Journal of Conflict Management and Peace Science*.

Dani Belo is a PhD candidate and SSHRC Doctoral Fellow in international conflict management and resolution at the Norman Paterson School of International Affairs, Carleton University (Ottawa, Canada). His research focuses on grey-zone conflicts, hybrid warfare, transatlantic security, the evolution NATO–Russia relations, conflict mediation, ethnic conflict, and nationalism in the post-Soviet region.

► **Canadian Global Affairs Institute**

The Canadian Global Affairs Institute focuses on the entire range of Canada's international relations in all its forms including (in partnership with the University of Calgary's School of Public Policy), trade investment and international capacity building. Successor to the Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute (CDFAI, which was established in 2001), the Institute works to inform Canadians about the importance of having a respected and influential voice in those parts of the globe where Canada has significant interests due to trade and investment, origins of Canada's population, geographic security (and especially security of North America in conjunction with the United States), social development, or the peace and freedom of allied nations. The Institute aims to demonstrate to Canadians the importance of comprehensive foreign, defence and trade policies which both express our values and represent our interests.

The Institute was created to bridge the gap between what Canadians need to know about Canadian international activities and what they do know. Historically Canadians have tended to look abroad out of a search for markets because Canada depends heavily on foreign trade. In the modern post-Cold War world, however, global security and stability have become the bedrocks of global commerce and the free movement of people, goods and ideas across international boundaries. Canada has striven to open the world since the 1930s and was a driving factor behind the adoption of the main structures which underpin globalization such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the World Trade Organization and emerging free trade networks connecting dozens of international economies. The Canadian Global Affairs Institute recognizes Canada's contribution to a globalized world and aims to inform Canadians about Canada's role in that process and the connection between globalization and security.

In all its activities the Institute is a charitable, non-partisan, non-advocacy organization that provides a platform for a variety of viewpoints. It is supported financially by the contributions of individuals, foundations, and corporations. Conclusions or opinions expressed in Institute publications and programs are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of Institute staff, fellows, directors, advisors or any individuals or organizations that provide financial support to, or collaborate with, the Institute.