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## *The Hollowness of Biden's "America is Back"*



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“America is back,” newly inaugurated President Joe Biden proudly announced to his foreign policy emissaries and the world in his first major foreign policy address. Speaking to American diplomats at the State Department on February 4, 2021, Biden declared. “America is back. America is back. Diplomacy is back at the center of our foreign policy.” He went on to say: “We must meet the new moment, accelerating global challenges. From the pandemic to the climate crisis, to nuclear proliferation...will only to be solved by nations working together and in common, we can’t do it alone.”

Many in the international diplomatic community breathed a sigh of relief. After President Donald J. Trump’s America First sloganeering, which included taking the U.S. out of the

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Iran nuclear deal as well as the Trans-Pacific Partnership and the Paris climate accord, Biden's words were a welcome change. "America is back," he said it twice, meaning America was back, fully engaged in diplomacy after the narcissistic Trump's one-man show. After four non-diplomatic years, a president experienced in foreign policy and a bilingual secretary of state, Antony Blinken, would shape American foreign policy in traditional diplomatic fashion. No more exceptional U.S. isolationism; Biden promised to work "together and in common."

Beyond merely touting diplomacy as "back at the center of our foreign policy," what did Biden's statement specifically mean for multilateral diplomacy? To say that America is back as far as diplomacy in foreign policy is one thing, but to say that America is back within the multilateral system is another. There is a considerable difference between thin cooperation and robust collaboration, just like the difference between superficial engagement and engagement with consequential obligations.

Two recent issues in Geneva show that Trumpian America First still resonates in United States foreign policy. Both show the hollowness of Biden's "America is back" in the Geneva multilateral setting.

Writing in the *Geneva Observer*, Philippe Mottaz describes how the United States has initiated an unnecessarily tense contest over leadership within the International Office of Migration (IOM). Whereas Biden's promise of "working together and in common" had great promise for U.S. allies, this case study shows that America First did not disappear after January 20, 2020.

The sitting Director-General (DG) of the IOM, the Portuguese Antonio Vitorino, was slated to be easily re-elected in May 2023, as is the tradition in almost all international organizations. Instead of supporting the European's choice, the Biden administration put forward an American, the DG's Deputy General for Reform and Management, Amy Pope. As Mottaz reports: "the U.S. administration stands accused by some European countries not only of disrupting what has been long accepted as common practice within the UN system, but of having picked a fight with its allies by pitting two Western candidates against each other—and in a manner which is highly disruptive to the good working of the organization at a critical juncture for migration policy."

"You don't act this way between allies, you just don't," fumed a senior European diplomat quoted by Mottaz. "By having defied the current DG nine months before the election, Washington has created a difficult atmosphere at the top of IOM, forcing people in leadership positions to take sides," Mottaz wrote.

The United States is the major financial contributor to the IOM. Previous IOM DG's have usually been American. But Vitorino, a former European commissioner and Portuguese Deputy Prime Minister, has had solid European backing before the upcoming May election.

Echoes of the U.S. brashness go beyond Geneva's diplomatic community. "The U.S. is embarrassing itself in pushing for Amy Pope's candidacy," tweeted an eminent refugee and migration specialist, Jeffrey Crisp, currently at Oxford University's Refugee Studies Center and formerly a senior official at UNHCR.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken stands solidly behind Pope. "The United States is proud to nominate Amy Pope to be the next Director General of the International Organization for Migration (IOM)... Amy Pope is the visionary and inclusive leader IOM needs at this time of unprecedented displacement and migration," he said at her official nomination, an obvious slight to Vitorino and fellow European diplomats. No official reason has been given by the United States for Pope's nomination.

In addition, to highlight the diplomatic tone deafness of the U.S. in what some consider a conflict of interest, Pope attended the COP 27 in Egypt as part of the U.S. contingent, not as part of IOM's official delegation. Even if she attended during a leave of absence from IOM, "This is particularly unbecoming for a senior international servant in an international organization," one diplomat told Mottaz.

A second example of thin cooperation is the American position in the negotiations of a process to produce some agreement on pandemic prevention, preparedness, and response within the World Health Organization (WHO). The conclusion of the process is scheduled for the 77<sup>th</sup> World Health Assembly in May 2024.

What is the American position on a legally-binding agreement? A U.S. Joint Statement by the Department of State and the Department of Health and Human Services on Negotiations of a Pandemic Accord issued by the Office of a Spokesperson Department of State on March 8, 2023 stated: "While the United States is deeply committed to a process that should result in shared commitments and shared responsibilities among nations, we are also aware of concerns by some that these negotiations could result in diminished U.S. sovereignty. The United States will not support any measure at the World Health Organization, including in these negotiations, that in any way undermines our sovereignty or security."

While the United States traditionally places its national laws above international law, this statement undermines serious attempts to formulate a binding treaty crucial to correcting errors at the WHO in dealing with Covid-19.

Although the chief U.S. negotiator, Pamela Hamamoto, released a positive statement that said: “We seek a Pandemic Accord that builds capacities; reduces pandemic threats posed by zoonotic diseases; enables rapid and more equitable responses; and establishes sustainable financing, governance, and accountability to ultimately break the cycle of panic and neglect,” this was clarified after the fourth round of negotiations finished on May 3, 2023, when the United States re-affirmed its reluctance to agree to an international treaty which could threaten its sovereignty.

As the above joint statement said: “The United States will not support any measure at the World Health Organization, including in these negotiations, that in any way undermines our sovereignty or security. Any accord resulting these negotiations would be designed to increase the transparency and effectiveness of cooperation among nations during global pandemics and would in no way empower the World Health Organization or any other international body to impose, direct, or oversee national actions. It will not compromise the ability of American citizens to make their own health care decisions.”

What happened to “we can’t do it alone”?

“America is back” is meaningless when promoting a candidate for DG at IOM in flagrant disregard for the current European Director-General, and potentially alienating allies when “working together and in common” is particularly needed to confront an overwhelming refugee crisis, Russian aggression, and Chinese expansion.

“America is back” is hypocritical when undercutting the potential for an international treaty to increase the WHO’s potential to better prepare and respond to future pandemics by re-asserting American national interest over international cooperation which was severely tested during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The sighs of relief with the election results of 2020 have turned to incomprehension. Diplomats in Geneva thought Trumpism was over, at least in foreign policy. The two examples cited are more than worrisome. “America is back,” is sounding more and more hollow.

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