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The Biden Administration and the Crossroads of Conflict



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Over the past fifteen years, President Joe Biden has been committed to reducing the U.S. use of military force in the Third World. Biden tried to convince President Barack Obama to reduce the military presence in Afghanistan, and warned Obama about pressure from the Pentagon, particularly from Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, to expand the U.S. role. As president, Biden stood up to the opposition from the military and moved quickly to end the U.S. occupation in Afghanistan. Unlike too many politicians and pundits on the left, Biden does not believe in the ability of force to make the world a better place.

Meanwhile, the mainstream media, particularly the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*, have been critical of the Biden administration for not being more aggressive in dealing with the crossroads of conflict in the Middle East and the Horn of Africa, particularly Syria and Sudan, respectively. For nearly two years, the *Post* has been offering commentaries that endorse the complete isolation of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and demand that Assad be treated as a pariah. These recommendations fly in the face of Arab efforts, led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, to find a way to begin the rehabilitation of Assad, the lessening of conflict in Syria, and the solution to a refugee crisis that finds one-third of the Syrian population displaced from their homes.

The major cheerleader for the *Post* campaign has been Josh Rogin, who has accused Biden of “abdicating diplomatic leadership to Moscow” and not challenging the efforts of Gulf states to bring the Assad regime back into the diplomatic field. In other editorial comment, there has been praise for the Trump administration’s regular use of sanctions against Syria, although there is no reason to believe that sanctions have had no impact on Assad’s actions. Sanctions, moreover, are more likely to have a negative impact on the civilian population that the United States wants to protect. And it has contributed to the immigration pressures in Europe.

U.S. sanctions against Cuba and Venezuela, for example, have worsened the economic and social conditions in both countries, and have contributed to the current crush of migrants on the U.S. border with Mexico. Most Third World nations have refused to take part in the U.S. sanctions program against Russia because of the harm that it does to the most vulnerable members of their populations. When UN Ambassador Madeleine Albright was asked about the sanctions that contributed to the deaths of half a million Iraqi children from malnutrition in the 1990s, she said it was “worth it.”

Meanwhile, the *Post* has been making the case for the use of force in Syria for the past decade. In 2013, Ezra Klein wrote that “We can definitely bomb Assad until it hurts,” but dodged the issue of what happens in Syria and the Middle East after hurting Assad. Klein believed that using force against Syria would “force Assad to the negotiating table, and even deter Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons. Unfortunately, the mainstream media have never acknowledged that the intelligence community, including the Central Intelligence Agency, determined that Iran gave up its program to develop nuclear weapons in 2003.

More recently, the *New York Times* got into the game with an oped that bellowed “The U.S. Cannot Allow Sudan to Fail,” which suggested that U.S. military power can achieve a solution to a civil war that finds Sudan’s regular army and its paramilitary forces on opposite sides of the barricades. The author of this exhortation, Lydia Polgreen, who covered the ethnic violence in the Darfur region of Sudan, concludes that the “only real solution to Sudan’s crisis” is building a “new nation...free from the dictatorship of the gun.” The U.S. experience in the past with nation building should tell you all you need to know about managing the transition of an Islamic extremist-inflected military rule to a democracy. The very notion of a democracy emerging from the chaos of virtually every Muslim state in the Middle East and North Africa is particularly risible.

For the United States to have success in altering the political framework of either Syria or Sudan it would have to reverse 50 to 70 years of havoc in both places. For the past half century, Syria has been ruled by the Assad family, father and son, with no regard for political freedom. Sudan has been at war with itself for most of its seventy-year history as an independent nation, yet Polgreen believes that the U.S. envoys could succeed at conflict resolution.

It is noteworthy that the crossroads of conflict in Ukraine find the Biden administration divided between a Secretary of Defense and a Chairman of the Joint Chiefs who believe there can be no absolute victory on the battlefield and a Secretary of State who believes that more lethal military weaponry will help the Ukrainians achieve their goals. The fact that the British government is now willing to make more long-range cruise missiles available to Ukraine will put pressure on the Biden administration to do the same. The British missile, the Storm Shadows, has a range that is three times further than anything that the United States has supplied.

No one in the Biden administration appears to realize that any solution to the conflict will require addressing Russian security requirements, which have increased due to the expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization on Russia's borders, and the deployment of U.S. weaponry in East and Central Europe. Even my own congressman, Representative Jamie Raskin, a leading progressive on Capitol Hill, believes that any efforts to channel Ukraine toward the negotiating table are symptomatic of a "colonialist reflex." In fact, liberals and progressives seem more willing than conservatives to permit the escalation of the war.

If the United States is get a handle on the national security state that has evolved since the attacks of 9/11, it will have to stop using the military to secure foreign policy goals. The military instrument failed in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan over the past 60 years, and has contributed to the perception of the United States as an authoritarian actor, which has weakened our democracy at home and our credibility and influence abroad. It is execrable that the United States has applied sanctions against Cuba and Venezuela that have punished their citizens, who then find themselves turned away from our borders.

The Biden administration still has not faced the dereliction of diplomacy that marked the Trump era, which has allowed for the growing influence of the Department of Defense. Ironically, the Secretary of Defense has become a strong spokesman for limiting the use of force, and the director of the Central Intelligence Agency has taken on missions that should have been given to the Secretary of State. Several years ago, Columbia's ambassador the the United States told his incoming foreign minister that "The U.S. State Department, which used to be important, is destroyed, it doesn't exist."

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