



Ghosts that Haunt President Biden



February 14, 2021 *Amir Taheri was the executive editor-in-chief of the daily Kayhan in Iran from 1972 to 1979. He has worked at or written for innumerable publications, published eleven books, and has been a columnist for Asharq Al-Awsat since 1987.*

Will President Joe Biden be able to shake off the ghosts of his predecessors and develop a foreign policy that goes beyond shibboleths to feed the mainstream media?

Pictured: President Joe Biden and former President Barack Obama at Biden's inauguration on January 20, 2021 in Washington, DC. (Photo by Drew Angerer/Getty Images)



- The slogan “diplomacy is back” is equally meaningless.... Diplomacy is a method of pursuing the goals of a policy. So if those goals are wrong and unjust, pursuing them through diplomacy would be a way of paving the road to hell.
- The key question is whether Biden regards China as an enemy or just a competitor that breaks some rules.
- On Yemen, Biden forgets that the war started during Obama’s presidency with full US support and endorsement by the United Nations, with the aim of restoring that country’s legitimate government. Biden does not make it clear whether or not he still subscribes to that aim, or if he does, what he intends to do about it.
- Burma is a tale of how cynical jackboots sold the Obama-Biden team a bill of goods to gain time for a brutal comeback.





Even before Joe Biden was sworn in as President, speculation was rife regarding the direction that US foreign policy might take under his command. Some observers speculated that he would simply return to the path traced and tested by his former boss, President Barack Obama.

Others, reminding us that as a lifelong foreign policy wonk, Biden wouldn't be satisfied with doing an Obama, that is to say dodging issues, leading from behind, and, as Hillary Clinton once observed, making a speech each time there was a crisis.

One thing everyone agreed upon, however, was that Biden would do his utmost to show that he intends to distance the US from the path traced by his predecessor, President Donald Trump.

To signal that intention, Biden used the catchphrase "America is back! Diplomacy is back!" to bolster the claim that under Trump, the US had deviated from the American way of doing things and ditched diplomacy in favor of confrontation and violence.

The catchphrase may sound nice as a slogan. The mainstream media welcomed it as a relief from Trump's abrasive vocabulary. The Washington Post praised Biden's first foreign policy speech for its "new tone" and "new attitude". The New York Times saw it as a signal that the US was returning to its leadership role.

However, in a political discourse, tone and attitude are mere ornaments. What matters is the substance, which remains obscure.

Biden says "America is back", but does not specify which America.

Three decades ago, America was sending half a million troops to topple a despot in a distant land to protect its regional allies and save a nation martyred by a neo-fascist regime. A decade ago, another America was drawing red lines for another sanguinary

despot before giving him the green light to massacre his people with chemical weapons.

There was an America that went out of its way to flush out turbaned terrorists who had sheltered Al-Qaeda. Then there was another America who would sign a peace treaty with the same turbaned terrorists. We have





seen one America smuggling cash to hostage-taking mullahs and another America that pressed their bones to breaking point.

All in all, it is hard to say which America Biden wants to bring back.

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Diplomacy is a method of pursuing the goals of a policy. So if those goals are wrong and unjust, pursuing them through diplomacy would be a way of paving the road to hell.

In his speech, Biden enumerated the goals of his yet unshaped foreign policy as: “Defending freedom, championing opportunity, upholding universal rights, respecting the rule of law, and treating every person with dignity.” He forgot motherhood and apple pie.

However, it is hard to find a single US president who would have disputed the list. What matters is how to promote those aims; something that requires concrete policies that deal with the real world.

Some commentators have cheered Biden for his “tough stance” against Vladimir Putin and the Chinese Communist leadership. They cite the following quote from Biden as evidence:

“I made it clear to President Putin in a manner very different from my predecessor that the days of the United States rolling over in the face of Russia’s aggressive actions — interfering with our elections, cyberattacks, poisoning its citizens — are over.”

It is not clear what that very “different manner” might have been. But, as Biden hails the return of diplomacy, it could not have been undiplomatic.

In any case all the mischief that he accuses Putin of were made when the Obama-Biden administration ran things in Washington.

He talks of “Russia’s aggressive actions”, presumably meaning the invasion and annexation of Crimea, the formal annexation of South Ossetia, the transforming of Abkhazia into a Russian military base, irredentist expansion in Donetsk, military intervention in Syria, and proximity pressure on the Baltic republics, all of which happened during the Obama-Biden tenure.

The charge of “interfering in our elections” also dates back to 2016, when Hillary Clinton accused Moscow of having rigged the elections to help Donald Trump get elected. But that election was organized by the Obama-Biden team. This time there was no “Russian intervention” supposedly because Trump lost or, if there was; Putin wanted Biden to win.

Biden also forgets that it was under his unnamed “predecessor” that the largest number of





Russian diplomats ever were kicked out of the United States, and that poisoning Russian citizens started when George W Bush was president, to continue under Obama-Biden and, more recently, Trump.

According to FBI reports, Russian cyberattacks on targets in the US also started during the Obama-Biden administration.

In Ernest Lubitsch's film "The Patriot", an adviser to the new Tsar of Russia warns him against "letting the ghost of your predecessor sit on the throne, wearing your mask." Biden would do well to liberate himself from the ghosts both of Obama and Trump.

Biden's first comments on China and the war in Yemen are weird to say the least.

He describes China as "our most serious competitor" and warns of its "growing ambitions to rival the United States" but does not say why this may be a threat. Throughout its history, the US knew how to distinguish a rival and a competitor from an enemy. Welcoming a challenge, competing in a race and respecting a rival have always been part of the American political culture and welcomed as long as the Marquess of Queensbury Rules were observed. The US always strove to win against rivals or competitors but also knew how to defang and defeat an enemy.

The key question is whether Biden regards China as an enemy or just a competitor that breaks some rules.

On Yemen, Biden forgets that the war started during Obama's presidency with full US support and endorsement by the United Nations, with the aim of restoring that country's legitimate government. Biden does not make it clear whether or not he still subscribes to that aim, or if he does, what he intends to do about it.

Making a declaration, and appointing a coordinator, are diversionary moves to hide unwillingness to do anything. As the young Swiss philosopher Remy Pralat says: "If you mean to do nothing, do it in style!"

Prompted by news of the day, Biden's comment on Burma is also weird. Burma is a tale of how cynical jackboots sold the Obama-Biden team a bill of goods to gain time for a brutal comeback.

Will Biden be able to shake off all those ghosts and develop a foreign policy that goes beyond shibboleths to feed the mainstream media?

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