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BIDENISM ABROAD

POLITICO REPORTER Alexander Ward's new book, *The Internationalists: The Fight to Restore American Foreign Policy after Trump*, is a document that may prove of interest to historians several decades from now. As a brisk narrative of the first two years of US foreign policy under Biden, it outlines the contributions of National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan and Secretary of State Antony Blinken, two of the Administration's most powerful figures. It explains how they digested Hillary Clinton's 2016 defeat at the hands of Donald Trump and then used their four years out of power to develop a foreign policy that could withstand the attacks of right-wing populism, thus insulating a longer-term effort to shore up America's global standing against the rambunctiousness of the country's domestic politics.¹

According to Ward, Democrats began to formulate this programme at National Security Action, a thinktank and 'incubator' founded by Sullivan and Obama speechwriter Ben Rhodes in 2018. As Biden campaigned through 2020 and then took office the following year, and as he staffed his Administration with people who had spent time at NatSec Action, US foreign policy was condensed into two slogans. One of these was 'a foreign policy for the middle class', the idea being that Biden would only pursue goals that he could plausibly describe as materially benefiting ordinary Americans.² This became a key component of his efforts to sell the 2021 withdrawal from Afghanistan to the wider public: why keep throwing money at an unwinnable war when it could be spent on infrastructure or green industry at home instead? The second slogan asserted that 'the world's greatest challenge was one of autocracies versus democracies'.³ This aimed to position Trump and his supporters as part of a global authoritarian axis that also included Putin, Xi and Kim Jong-Un. There could be no defending and revitalizing democracy at home—and January 6 had made it clear that such a defence

was needed—without confronting leaders who worked to erode democracy abroad.

The Democrat worldview

In Ward's account, the effort to repair relations with Europe following four years of Trump-induced chaos was motivated almost entirely by Biden's view that the United States could not afford to confront Russia as a lone superpower. It had to do so as the leader of a world system, a 'rules-based international order', to use our historical moment's preferred euphemism for 'empire'. If American intervention in the Balkans had certified NATO's continued usefulness in a world no longer defined by great-power conflict, a collective response to Putin's aggression would confirm that NATO still remained useful in a world to which such conflict had returned. 'If Putin succeeded in wiping Ukraine off the map', Ward writes, 'the world America helped build would crumble on this administration's watch'.⁴ Or, as one general said as Biden prepared to give a speech in Warsaw following the invasion, 'We have to preserve the order that has brought peace and stability to the world since the end of World War II. If Putin wins, the order goes *poof*. It would set the conditions for the next great war.'⁵

The Biden Administration viewed China as presenting an even greater challenge. Its October 2022 National Security Strategy left no doubt that competition with Beijing was now the organizing principle of United States foreign policy. 'The People's Republic of China', it says, 'harbours

¹ Ward—according to his LinkedIn profile—attended Washington DC's American University during Obama's first term before interning at the State Department (in its Office of Regional Security and Arms Transfers), the Council on Foreign Relations and the Atlantic Council. Having completed this tour through the institutional apparatus of the American foreign-policy mainstream, he spent several years writing moderately hawkish articles for Vox Media. In 2021, he apparently followed his editor to *Politico*, which was in the process of being taken over by German media conglomerate Axel Springer SE, a company that lists support for Zionism, free-market economics and the values of the US among its core principles. In the US, *Politico* is run by the kinds of die-hard Democrats who don't see anything objectionable in that. On the evidence of *The Internationalists*, Ward is a typical figure within this constellation.

² Alexander Ward, *The Internationalists*, New York 2024, p. 32; henceforth, *TI*.

³ *TI*, p. 23.

⁴ *TI*, p. 203.

⁵ *TI*, p. 278.

the intention and, increasingly, the capacity to reshape the international order in favour of one that tilts the global playing field to its benefit'. The next ten years, it warns, will be the 'decisive decade', a phrase it repeats five times. Preventing China from overtaking the US as the world's strongest economy and establishing itself as regional hegemon in East Asia 'will demand more of the United States in the Indo-Pacific than has been asked of us since the Second World War', an eye-catching assertion when one considers the resources the United States devoted to its conflicts in Korea and Vietnam.⁶ While the Biden Administration's exchanges with China haven't involved as much sabre rattling as Trump's, it is also clear that military conflict is on the table in the event that economic competition doesn't go well for the United States.

Heads of state are obliged to claim that the period in which they take power is a crucial one for their country's future, and Americans who lived through the decade-plus of hysterics that followed September 11, who spent years being told that Al Qaeda and ISIS had not just the desire but the ability to bring the United States to its knees, may be understandably suspicious of such rhetoric. But Biden's understanding of the stakes for American hegemony is probably reasonable. Putin may be paranoid, but he is not a 'madman', and he would not have invaded Ukraine had he not decided that the US—and, by extension, the alliance system that serves as the foundation of its trans-oceanic power—was weaker than at any point in at least the past thirty years. And in China, the US faces a credible rival for superpower status for the first time in forty years. These challenges to US supremacy have come at a time when America's ability to keep both its allies and enemies in line is markedly diminished. As one official lamented to Ward shortly before Putin's invasion, 'We're doing everything right and the Russians are probably going to invade anyway'. Ward asked him if that 'meant something bigger—that America, even when everything was going well, couldn't stop major global crises anymore'. The official replied, 'Yeah, that's certainly part of the frustration'.⁷

The real interest of Ward's book, however, is that it shares the Democratic Party's worldview, fantasies and blind spots. It is a manifestation of the ideology it attempts to describe. Ward seems to be infatuated with the Administration's foreign-policy stars, particularly Sullivan, whom

⁶ 'National Security Strategy', The White House, October 2022, pp. 3, 2, 38.

⁷ *TI*, p. 246.

he records one Clinton loyalist describing as ‘essentially a once-in-a-generation talent’. The youngest National Security Advisor since George McBundy, Sullivan, we are told, was named ‘Most Likely to Succeed’ in his Minnesota high school, where teachers ‘fawned over his ability to hand in flawlessly written assignments’. He graduated *summa cum laude* from Yale, got himself to Oxford on a Rhodes scholarship, and then returned to Yale for a law degree. As a staffer on Amy Klobuchar’s Senate campaign, he impressed his colleagues by demonstrating an ‘uncanny ability’ to recall Billy Joel lyrics.⁸ When someone starts telling you that remembering the lyrics to pop songs is not just impressive but uncanny, implying such an ability may be counted as among someone’s qualifications to serve as National Security Advisor, you have entered the ideological world of the Democratic Party. Of Sullivan’s intellectual contributions to America’s global thinking, we don’t hear much (Ward even praises Sullivan at one point for never revealing ‘what his true view on Afghanistan was’).⁹ Ward presents Sullivan as more of an advertising guy, someone with ideas on how Democrats might better sell the old foreign-policy plan (American supremacy forever, because it’s the right thing to do) to voters whose consumer preferences have evolved. Reading between the lines, one suspects that Sullivan’s apparent lack of intellectual ambition has something to do with his professional success. To be a Wunderkind in the eyes of Hillary Clinton and Joe Biden is likely a matter of telling your elders that they have been right all along.

The larger story that Ward tells is naturally one of decency, setbacks, perseverance and ultimate triumph. The future captains of foreign policy spend the Trump Administration in ‘the wilderness’, as Ward titles the book’s first section. They assume power with a grand vision for the restoration of America’s global leadership, but first they must extricate the US from the quagmire of Afghanistan, and withdrawal turns out to be more chaotic than anyone anticipated (that’s the setback). Determined to be remembered for more than Afghanistan, however, the foreign-policy ‘A-Team’ pulls itself off the mat and rallies the free world to Ukraine’s defence, eventually convincing a sceptical Europe that Putin is about to make good on years of threats. This show of diplomatic strength isn’t enough to deter Putin from invading, but the Russian army gets bogged down in the countryside and fails to take Kyiv, and the autocrat’s

⁸ *TI*, pp. 5, 6.

⁹ *TI*, p. 59.

anticipated triumph turns into a humiliating stalemate. Though the fate of Ukraine continues to hang in the balance, the US has returned to its seat at the head of the table. Ward's book ends with a near panegyric to Bidenism abroad. 'America was ready for renewal', the book's final sentences read. 'The world was there to remake. There were at least two more years to get it done.'¹⁰

All of this sounds a little psychedelic from the perspective of 2024, particularly the line, 'The world was there to remake', a fantasy that gets harder to sustain with each passing year. But while *The Internationalists* was published in February 2024, it seems to have been written, edited, proofread and typeset by 6 October, 2023. On 7 October, Hamas and other Palestinian resistance groups exploded several fantasies at the heart of Biden's foreign policy. One was the idea that the US could disentangle itself from the Middle East without ceding some measure of control over the region's power dynamics. Another held that America remained the only real protagonist in international affairs, that the rest of the world would sit tight and wait to be 'remade' rather than trying to make something happen on their own. The third was the fantasy that American foreign policy could be revitalized, and a new century of US hegemony secured, simply by coming up with new ways to advertise the old foreign policy. The result is that Biden seems likely to leave office—whether in 2025, 2029, or somewhere in between—having intensified the very crises of American hegemony that he sought to resolve.

Slow-growth empire

The roots of the American imperial crisis are by now familiar: slowing global growth since the 1970s as a result of persistent overcapacity in manufacturing, with consequent rising structural un- and under-employment, widening economic inequality, and increased political instability among the world's growing surplus populations. Unable to resolve the problem of manufacturing overcapacity by igniting a new wave of global growth, the US has tried several times to juice economic performance through other means, particularly asset-price inflation.¹¹ From the dot-com bubble of the 1990s to the housing boom of the

¹⁰ *TI*, p. 300.

¹¹ Robert Brenner, 'What is Good for Goldman Sachs is Good for America', UCLA, 18 April 2009. Original paper available on escholarship.org.

2000s, to the Federal Reserve's decision to keep interest rates as low as possible from 2008 to 2022, no version of asset-price inflation has ever produced more than a temporary fix, and some of them have culminated in destructive crises of their own. Nevertheless, the United States cannot abandon asset-price inflation entirely, as the stock market's current overreliance on a handful of tech giants demonstrates. Every time a new start-up announces that they have unlocked the potential of the blockchain, cryptocurrencies, wearable computers, or (most recently) artificial intelligence, investors and policymakers alike are eager to give them a hearing, and it is not hard to understand why. For investors awash with surplus capital, every such announcement means another speculative windfall, and for policymakers each nascent innovation holds out the tantalizing possibility of growth. Were one of Silicon Valley's inventions ever to actually fulfil that potential, the US might be able to look forward to a new era of continued dominance.

In the meantime, however, Washington has been planning for and adjusting to a world in which growth continues to slow despite the best efforts of its tech entrepreneurs, a world in which the US will need to rely on a more generalized use of coercion to stay at the top of the pyramid. It is in these plans and adjustments that one can discern a more realistic vision for the maintenance of imperial prerogatives. The war on terror, launched after September 11, has been the most important of these adjustments to date. By framing the conflict with Islamism in global terms and emphasizing the amorphous nature of the enemy, the US advanced a rationale for militarizing its relationship with much of the world, deploying Special Forces and Predator drones to police pockets of unrest in poor and middle-income countries just as domestic law enforcement agencies patrol poor communities at home. With its military power diffusing throughout critical regions of the developing world rather than massing along any particular front, the US sought to ensure that it could manage and contain the global consequences of the fracturing economic order it supervised. It wasn't a solution to the crisis that had been unfolding since the 1970s, but it was the best available alternative: a more thoroughgoing militarization of global relationships could at least buy Washington some time while it waited for the next growth wave to materialize.

By the time Trump took office, however, two challenges had appeared that could not be addressed within a war on terror framework. The first

was Russia, which hadn't strengthened enormously in its own right but had at least recovered somewhat from the economic disaster that followed the collapse of the USSR. Putin felt that the US had been weakened sufficiently—thanks to a combination of the Iraq invasion, the global financial crisis and a generally overextended military posture—to allow him to be more assertive regarding his concerns about continued NATO expansion eastward. The second challenge, China, presented the more serious threat, because that country had very much strengthened in its own right. In the first two decades of the twenty-first century, it was a near consensus among mainstream analysts that China's economy would surpass America's in GDP terms. Today, though it is grappling with major problems, China continues to benefit from deepening trade relationships with the emerging world, and its cost advantages in the production of consumer durables such as electric cars are likely to present a serious challenge to the US for decades. This is not a situation with which Americans are familiar—the US has boasted the world's largest economy since the late nineteenth century, and it has been the world's most powerful nation state since the Second World War. Now, for the first time in generations, American supremacy cannot be taken for granted, and by some measures its economic supremacy has already ended. When adjusted for purchasing power parity, China's GDP overtook that of the US sometime around 2016.¹²

The American 'pivot' toward confronting China began in earnest with Obama's dispatch of an aircraft-carrier group to the region and the Trans-Pacific Partnership, a trade agreement designed to blunt China's economic influence over the Pacific Rim. The TPP was signed in 2016, but in 2017 Trump scuttled the agreement for idiosyncratic personal reasons. This became one of his hallmarks. The most important thing to remember when analysing Trump's foreign policy thinking is that it doesn't exist as such. Across a long career in real estate and a shorter one in politics, Trump has made his motivations and interests perfectly clear. He is drawn to whatever benefits him as an individual. He is addicted to television, and if he believes that saying or doing something will get him media attention, he says or does it. He likes buying and selling, which provide opportunities for getting the better end of a deal. His world-view is fundamentally transactional. 'He inhabits a world before David

¹² See Chris Giles, 'Sorry America, China has a bigger economy than you', *FT*, 6 December 2023.

Ricardo, if not before Adam Smith, in which wealth is understood as a cake that nations compete for a cut of', as one columnist wrote. 'If the US runs a current account deficit with China, *ipso facto* it is losing . . . Don't bother reciting all that America gets in return'.¹³ That may be crude psychologizing, but some people just have a crude psychology. Convinced that China was 'ripping off' the United States, Trump imposed tariffs on a wide swathe of Chinese goods, including televisions, weapons, satellites and batteries.

'Trade wars are good', Trump once tweeted, 'and easy to win'.¹⁴ That turned out not to be true. As a specific policy instrument, the tariffs were a failure. Various reports estimated that they detracted from US GDP by about half a percentage point, and they also may have cost the US economy some 300,000 jobs. Instead of decreasing America's overall trade deficit, the tariffs simply shifted it away from China and toward other economies in East and Southeast Asia.¹⁵ Nevertheless, Biden decided to retain the general thrust of Trump's China strategy when he took office, completing the pivot that began under Obama and accelerated under Trump. 'We looked at what the Trump administration did over four years', one Biden official told reporters in February 2021, 'and found merit in the basic proposition of an intense strategic competition with China and the need for us to engage in that vigorously, systematically across every instrument of our government and every instrument of our power'.¹⁶

US–China competition

The competition Biden envisioned with China is unfolding through two dimensions. The first is military. One of Biden's first major diplomatic successes was unveiled in September 2021 as AUKUS, the trilateral security partnership among the US, Australia and the United Kingdom that is now contemplating the addition of Japan as well. By agreeing to purchase nuclear submarines from the US and UK, and by cancelling preexisting submarine orders from France, Australia made

¹³ Janan Ganesh, 'How Europe should negotiate with Donald Trump', *FT*, 20 February 2024.

¹⁴ 'Trump tweets: "Trade wars are good, and easy to win"', *Reuters*, 2 March 2018.

¹⁵ Ryan Hass and Abraham Denmark, 'More pain than gain: How the US–China trade war hurt America', Brookings, 7 August 2020.

¹⁶ *TI*, p. 42.

a long-term bet on continued American supremacy in the Indo-Pacific. The new submarines, which are expected to come online sometime around 2040, could be used to break a Chinese blockade of Taiwan in the event of large-scale military conflict, and they could also be used to blockade the Strait of Malacca and deprive China of oil imports from the Middle East. According to the US Defense Intelligence Agency, China's military capabilities have improved in recent years, 'from a defensive, inflexible ground-based force charged with domestic and peripheral security responsibilities to a joint, highly agile, expeditionary, and power-projecting arm of Chinese foreign policy'.¹⁷ In the past decade, Xi has announced a number of reforms, including the establishment of joint theatre commands and a Joint Staff Department, the opening of a dedicated Army headquarters, the elevation of the PLA's missile force to a full branch of the military, and the unification of space and cyber warfare operations under the Strategic Support Force.

China cannot hope to match America's global projection of military force, but Washington thinks it believes itself capable of achieving something approaching military parity in its own neighbourhood, specifically access denial along its own southeast coastline. That is no small ambition—the US would consider even regional Chinese military parity to be a disaster. Hence the urgency behind selling nuclear-powered submarines to Australia, and hence the Biden administration's decision to ban technology transfers (particularly semiconductor components) and investments that would help China acquire or develop the kinds of technical capacity it needs to complete the modernization of its armed forces.

The second dimension of US–China competition is economic. So far, the results under Biden have been mixed. On the plus side for the United States, the days when China's eventual ascension to global economic supremacy was discussed as something of an inevitability are over. Today, the period from 1991 to 2018, when China's economy grew at the fastest pace in the world and never turned in an annual GDP growth figure lower than 6.75 per cent, looks less like the passing of the hegemon's torch and more like an East Asian *trente glorieuses*.¹⁸ Though China would appear to have secured its place as the world's primary hub for the manufacture of consumer goods, it is now struggling with the same

¹⁷ 'China Military Power', Defense Intelligence Agency, 2018, p. v.

¹⁸ 'China GDP Growth Rate 1961–2024', Mactrotrends.net.

problems of overcapacity and high debt burdens, particularly in the real-estate sector, that have long troubled the global north. The CCP's 2024 growth target, 5 per cent, is about half what the Chinese economy averaged during the good years, and one does not anticipate China managing double-digit growth again anytime soon. China's attempts to deal with the overcapacity problem by externalizing it, via the funding of lavish infrastructure projects throughout the developing world, now also appear to be hitting their limits. Developing countries currently owe China more than \$1 trillion, and the grace periods before borrowers had to begin servicing those debts have largely ended. By 2021, nearly sixty countries that had borrowed money from China found themselves in financial distress.¹⁹

On the other hand, China's new role as lender to the developing world has been quite effective from a diplomatic point of view. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013, now has an impressive record of achievement. By June 2023, according to a CCP report, 'China had signed more than 200 BRI cooperation agreements with over 150 countries and 30-plus international organizations across five continents'.²⁰ Over three thousand projects have been launched, and more than \$1 trillion has been invested. Some of the fruits of this investment include: a \$6 billion railway connecting Laos and China; the El Hamdania Central Port, Algeria's first deep-water port; a railway and water pipeline connecting Ethiopia and Djibouti; a Chinese industrial zone in the Gulf of Suez; a manufacturing hub near Addis Ababa; the Mombasa–Nairobi Standard Gauge Railway in Kenya; the provision of satellite television to villages in Nigeria; the establishment of freight rail services connecting China to forty-two European terminals; a significant expansion of Azerbaijan's Port of Baku; infrastructure development across Central Asia; Indonesia's first high-speed rail line; an airport and bridge in the Maldives; and a shuttle train to transport pilgrims during the Hajj in Saudi Arabia. That list doesn't even touch on the Americas, where BRI has also had a substantial impact.

China now finds itself a major driver of global capital flows, and the profligacy of its lending has made it into an easy first-choice phone

¹⁹ 'Developing countries owe China at least \$1.1 trillion—and the debts are due', *CNN*, 13 November 2023.

²⁰ 'Belt and Road celebrates decade of achievements with fresh commitments', State Council Information Office, 20 October 2023.

call for developing-world politicians in search of a legacy infrastructure project to name after themselves. It also helps that China's loans have generally come with fewer political stipulations than those offered by the US. As Larry Summers tweeted in April 2023, 'Somebody from a developing country said to me, "What we get from China is an airport. What we get from the United States is a lecture"'.²¹ In 2021, the Biden Administration decided it was time to come up with an alternative to BRI, and the G7 formally launched Build Back Better World, or 'B3W', an international investment counterpart to Biden's programme of domestic industrial stimulus. Promising to get private-sector funds to low- and middle-income countries, the Administration claimed that 'B3W will collectively catalyse hundreds of billions of dollars of infrastructure investment . . . in the coming years'. As of late 2023, America's total commitment to the programme, which had since been rebranded as Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment, sat at around \$30 billion.²²

Development economics

Trump did nothing to counter China's debt-fuelled diplomacy during his time in office. He was not personally involved in developing or implementing 'Prosper Africa', his Administration's 'signature initiative' for the continent, whose impact was minimal. The Trump Administration's most high-profile engagement with Africa took the form of several goodwill visits by First Lady Melania Trump, who talked about maternal and hospital care and promoted her anti-bullying campaign. Whatever goodwill those visits built up was easily overwhelmed by Trump's bans on travel and refugees from Muslim-majority states. His most famous remark on the continent remains his reference to African nations as 'shithole countries'. And in Latin America, Trump did less than nothing. He put responsibility for South and Central America in the hands of unreconstructed neoconservative John Bolton, who called Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua the 'Troika of Tyranny', blustered that 'the Monroe Doctrine is alive and well', and tried to assist a *coup d'état* in Venezuela. Trump himself demonized migrants as rapists and drug dealers at every opportunity and helped to unify the region in its search

²¹ 'Summers Warns US Is Getting "Lonely" as Other Powers Band Together', *Bloomberg*, 14 April 2023.

²² Michael Lipin, 'US Boosts Funds for Infrastructure Program for Developing Nations Above \$30 Billion', *Voice of America News*, 17 October 2023.

for partners who could counteract American influence. Of the seven countries that shifted diplomatic ties from Taipei to Beijing during the Trump presidency—El Salvador, the Dominican Republic, Panama, Burkina Faso, Kiribati, Solomon Islands, and Democratic Republic of São Tomé and Príncipe—three were from Latin America.

So far, Biden has also disappointed African and Latin American leaders. Though Blinken did manage to visit Africa three times in ten months, the Administration's overall approach to the continent treats it as little more than ancillary to great-power conflict. And in Latin America, politicians have been annoyed to find Biden in a largely 'electoral mood', prioritizing security measures to halt immigration above efforts at economic integration or development. In November 2023, when the Administration hosted a summit to discuss economic cooperation and supply-chain reforms in the Americas, Mexico's former ambassador to China described it as 'something the United States is pretty much just doing to check the box. To say that they are doing something about Latin America, that they remember Latin America exists, to pretend to have a plan.'²³

Meanwhile, Biden's efforts to harden border security have been enthusiastic and sustained. He decided not to restore the right to asylum that Trump eliminated when the pandemic hit, declined to rein in the cruelty of the Border Patrol, and refused to tear down any portions of Trump's border wall. He has also expelled huge numbers of migrants from the United States, including nearly 4,000 Haitians in May 2022 alone. Congress blocked Biden's package of immigration 'reforms' in February 2024, but that bill nevertheless represents a drastic rightward lurch in the Democratic Party's plans for addressing the issue, all but guaranteeing that the harsh regime of migration policing pioneered by Obama will serve as a template going forward.

The delay in making a real alternative to the Belt and Road Initiative available to Latin America, Africa and the rest of the developing world is hard to comprehend from a strategic standpoint. 'China is not just trying to create an alternative world order', one asset management analyst told the *Financial Times* in February. 'It is succeeding. Many in the West

²³ Ari Hawkins, 'Biden confronts deep skepticism of US agenda in Latin America', *Politico*, 11 March 2023.

cannot gauge the success China is having in the rest of the world.’²⁴ One gets the sense of an administration that would love to focus all its attention on China, Russia and climate change, if only everyone else would calm down for a little while and stop provoking new crises every three months. That’s certainly the thrust of *The Internationalists*. The withdrawal from Afghanistan was chaotic, and it provoked a domestic political firestorm that dragged on for months, but it simply had to be done—ending America’s longest war just could not be put off any longer. Similarly, the US didn’t get to decide when Putin was going to invade Ukraine, but once they realized that invasion was a near certainty, the State Department was duty-bound to drop everything else and mobilize America’s European allies. By the end of 2022, however, Biden could turn to bigger issues. ‘There were two more years to get it done’, Ward writes. By ‘it’, he means China and climate change.

Ward’s optimism rings hollow. Both America’s economic competition with China and Biden’s desire for the US to lead the global green transition are beset with contradictions that in many cases appear to be insurmountable. To begin with, the US has identified semiconductors as the twenty-first century’s key economic battleground. Trump made semiconductors a national-security priority when he added Huawei to the government’s list of companies prohibited from purchasing chips built according to US designs, and Biden has since expanded on Trump’s initiative by cutting off the entire Chinese tech industry from US-designed advanced semiconductors. However, America and China’s respective positions within the semiconductor global value chain, or GVC, make it likely that this strategy will fail. US firms design chips, but they are manufactured in Taiwan, Japan or South Korea, then sent to China, where they are tested and installed in products like washing machines, computers and cell phones. While the Administration’s export controls on semiconductor designs and other tech components are intended to slow the growth of Chinese tech firms, their lasting impact will probably be something like the opposite: ‘Rising powers don’t sit idly by when dominant states disrupt their access to critical resources. Typically, they respond by subsidizing industrial development, pushing their businesses to upgrade into high-value positions to become self-sufficient’. In addition, ‘the structure of GVCs makes it difficult for the dominant

²⁴ James Kynge and Keith Fray, ‘China’s plan to reshape world trade’, *FT*, 27 February 2024.

power to coerce the rising power without igniting business resistance at home and easier for the rising power to upgrade its industrial base in response'.²⁵ That's exactly what is happening now: China is pouring money into the development of a domestic semiconductor industry (while America's efforts to do the same are flailing), and American companies are continuing to get their designs to China via 'loopholes, third parties, and dummy companies'. For a Biden Administration still trying to verify that it has won the fight against inflation, the idea of cracking down on the US companies that are making use of these loopholes presents its own set of political complications.

Aims and outcomes

With respect to climate change, the contradictions are even harder to navigate. By definition, this is not a problem that can be addressed through competition among nation states. What's required is coordination and cooperation, on a global scale, to decarbonize production as quickly as possible. Instead, the Biden Administration is wasting time trying to shore up domestic firms that are clearly inferior to their international counterparts, further delaying a decarbonization effort that is already hopelessly behind schedule. To take just one example, Chinese automaker BYD currently produces the most affordable electric cars in the world, with six of its models among the world's ten best sellers.²⁶ While the electrification of the world's fleet of passenger vehicles is, on its own, a paltry response to the climate crisis, it is nevertheless important to end the production of combustion engine automobiles as quickly as possible. Speed is of the essence here; we do not have time for the US to spend decades kneecapping advanced Chinese automakers and retrofitting Detroit just so America can 'win' the green transition. But because the American automakers that are fitfully ramping up production on electric cars cannot even begin to compete with BYD on price, the Biden Administration is now characterizing BYD vehicles as potential security threats because of the risk that their on-board computers may send 'sensitive data' back to China. 'China's policies could flood our market with its vehicles, posing risks to our national security', Biden

²⁵ Miles Evers, 'Why the United States Is Losing the Tech War With China', *Lawfare Media*, 14 January 2024.

²⁶ 'Best-selling plug-in electric vehicle models worldwide in 2023', *Statista*, 4 March 2024.

said. 'I'm not going to let that happen on my watch'.²⁷ Biden has directed his Secretary of Commerce to open a formal investigation into BYD. Meanwhile, the Inflation Reduction Act, touted by the White House as the biggest package of green policies in history, contains not a dollar of investment for public transport in the US, where transportation accounts for nearly a third of total carbon emissions. The IRA also requires that any new wind or solar projects on public lands would also have to be accompanied by millions of acres worth of leases for new oil and gas wells, a suicidal policy without which the bill never could have made it through Congress.

In addition, the various components of Biden's effort to rejuvenate the transatlantic alliance have sometimes been at odds with one another. Although NATO shipments of arms and other military equipment to Ukraine, which began in 2015 and increased dramatically after the invasion, helped transform what could have been a swift victory for Russia into a gruelling and expensive ground war, the prolongation of the stalemated conflict is now undermining pan-European solidarity. Sanctions on Russia, including the cancellation of Nord Stream 2 and a ban on Russian fossil fuels, have been particularly costly for Germany. Europe's largest economy shrank in 2023, and German economic weakness is now contributing to stagnation in Eastern Europe as well. Along with a renewed influx of migrants—including more than a million Ukrainian refugees—this stagnation has boosted the political prospects of the far right, with the AfD taking second place in national polls since June 2023. AfD support retreated slightly following sizable counterprotests in December, but the second-order consequences of Europe's support for Ukraine will continue to roil German politics until some kind of negotiated settlement ends the war. Biden's NATO push was advertised as a way to roll back global autocracy, but it has so far had the unintended effect of pushing the German far right to 20 per cent in the national polls.

Looking back over the first two-and-a-half years of Biden's term, one finds a series of foreign-policy initiatives that do not seem to be achieving—or in some cases even approaching—their stated goals: a confrontation with China that is making things harder rather than

²⁷ 'Statement from President Biden on Addressing National Security Risks to the US Auto Industry', The White House, 29 February 2004.

easier for American businesses, a green industrial policy that is sacrificing speedy decarbonization on the altar of America-first economic chauvinism, a set of migration restrictions that do nothing to address the root causes of migration, and a European war against ‘autocracy’ that is providing an electoral boost to the European far right. For a little while, it might have been possible to believe that having navigated the Afghanistan withdrawal and the initial shock of Putin’s invasion, the Biden administration had set itself up for more sustainable progress. But that came to an end on 7 October 2023, as did the illusion that the American empire could still manage the world system on the basis of anything approaching international consent.

The Middle East

The Internationalists contains only one discussion of Israel and Palestine. It concerns the violence that erupted in East Jerusalem after Israeli soldiers stormed the Al Aqsa mosque in May 2021. Everything Ward writes about the Biden Administration’s response to that episode reads ominously in light of Al Aqsa Flood and Israel’s subsequent campaign of collective punishment, which many observers, including the UN’s Special Rapporteur on the Occupied Palestinian Territories, have argued rises to the level of genocide. Again and again, Biden officials expressed the view that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is something they would rather not have to deal with. ‘The administration didn’t want to get bogged down in the Middle East’, Ward writes. ‘There were bigger problems to solve . . . The thinking among the president’s advisers was *this too shall pass*’. ‘We’re really not going to get involved in Israel–Palestine’. one source told him. ‘We’re going to let this go by’, another said.²⁸ Ward acknowledges that Biden was slow to mount a substantive response to the May 2021 crisis, but he does not question the larger strategy of putting Israel and Palestine on what he calls ‘the backburner’ in order to focus more energy on Russia, China and climate change. It was this idea, the notion that the US could simply choose to not ‘get involved’ or ‘get bogged down’ in the actions of its most important client state, that October 7 revealed as delusional.

When Biden officials said that they didn’t want to get bogged down in Israel, they meant that they approved of their predecessor’s plan for the

²⁸ *TI*, pp. 97, 88, 92, 90.

region and hoped to continue implementing it. As Oliver Eagleton wrote in *Sidecar*, the US since 2016 has pursued a goal of replacing ‘direct intervention with oversight from a distance’, a goal requiring ‘a security settlement that would strengthen friendly regimes and constrain the influence of nonconforming ones’.²⁹ Under the Abraham Accords, which were signed in 2020, Bahrain and the UAE normalized relations with Israel and began to receive increased arms shipments from the US. Three years earlier, Washington had moved its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem and formally recognized the city as Israel’s capital. The decision outraged the UN—fourteen out of fifteen members of the Security Council supported a motion condemning the move. Trump’s Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said that the decision ‘did not indicate any final status for Jerusalem’, which would be left to the two parties to negotiate and decide’, but this was the kind of lie that did not even intend to be convincing.³⁰ The decision was a clear bet that the US could get away with ignoring Palestinians and the occupation entirely as it shored up alliances with reactionary states across the region. America’s official strategy for the Middle East, then, assumed that the occupation would continue indefinitely.

Biden decided to stick with Trump’s plan. Though he called the decision to move the embassy ‘short-sighted and frivolous’, he said even as a candidate that he would not move American diplomats back to Tel Aviv, and a corollary promise to open a consulate for Palestinians in East Jerusalem remains unfulfilled. Instead, Biden’s State Department has worked to add Saudi Arabia to the Abraham Accords, even as it did nothing to advance the ‘two-state solution’ that Biden still claims to support. It was as though Frederick Kagan and other turn-of-the-century neocons were whispering in Sullivan’s ear as he fleshed out America’s strategy for the Middle East. In *Present Dangers: Crisis and Opportunity in American Foreign and Defence Policy*, published in 2000, Kagan had discussed the importance of maintaining a ‘two-war standard’, meaning a military sufficiently large and powerful to be capable of fighting full-scale wars against two regional powers at the same time. Coming into office in 2021, it would have been clear to Biden who those two were going to be: Russia and China. That meant direct military supervision

²⁹ Oliver Eagleton, ‘Imperial Designs’, *NLR–Sidecar*, 3 November 2023.

³⁰ Carol Morell, ‘US Embassy’s move to Jerusalem should take at least two years, Tillerson says’, *Washington Post*, 8 December 2017.

of the Middle East was off the table for the foreseeable future. Instead, the State Department would ensure that the region's reactionary powers were armed to the teeth, and the Palestinians would be left to their ongoing fate.

For Saudi Arabia to have joined the Abraham Accords would likely have doomed the Palestinians to decades of continued occupation, and it is plausible that Hamas launched Al Aqsa Flood in part to stop that process in its tracks. There is no question that the US, like Israel itself, was caught completely off guard by October 7. The notion of Palestinian political agency played no role whatsoever in the State Department's global strategizing, a blind spot most vividly illustrated by the fact that Jake Sullivan wrote the following in a *Foreign Affairs* essay that went to print on 2 October 2023: 'Although the Middle East remains beset with perennial challenges, the region is quieter than it has been for decades.'³¹ Since then, an Administration that took power promising to lead a worldwide defence of democratic humanism has thrown the full weight of its diplomatic might and arms-manufacturing industry behind a right-wing government that is carrying out one of the most brutal campaigns of collective punishment in history. Biden has vetoed several UN resolutions calling for a ceasefire in Gaza, Blinken has called South Africa's case against Israel at the International Court of Justice 'meritless', and Department of Defence Spokesman John Kirby has repeatedly asserted that the US will refuse to draw any 'red lines' on Israel's conduct in Gaza, conduct that has included the mass killing of people lining up to receive food aid.

Gaza versus hegemony

From a strategic point of view, the Biden Administration's white-knuckle support for Israel and Netanyahu is not difficult to understand. The US views Israel as the crucial guarantor of its control over the Middle East, not just despite but because of its belligerence. For America to restrain Israel in a material way, for Biden to reduce or end weapons shipments to Netanyahu, or for the State Department to demand of Israel the concessions that would be required in order to establish a Palestinian state, would be for the US to deviate from the repressive political logic that

³¹ 'The Sources of American Power: A Foreign Policy for a Changed World', *Foreign Affairs*, Nov/Dec 2023.

undergirds its whole approach to the region. Israel is a snarling dog that menaces Iran and other anti-US powers around the Gulf, and the US can only shorten Israel's leash so much (which is to say, very little) before it loses the deterrence benefits of Israeli aggression.

However, Biden's backing for Netanyahu's war may now be pushing the costs of US support for Israel beyond what American hegemony can bear. The war has made expansion of the Abraham Accords much more difficult: negotiations were frozen after October 7, and though Saudi Arabia still clearly desires 'normalization' with Israel, it has now returned to its position that this will depend upon an actual resolution of the Israeli–Palestine conflict, as opposed to being satisfied with vague signs of 'progress' toward such a resolution.³² Even if Israel were to agree to the Kingdom's terms and cooperate in establishing a Palestinian state—and that is unlikely, even after Netanyahu leaves office—the war has cemented popular regional hatred of Israel for at least another generation, which will make it harder for regional autocrats to balance what the US demands in exchange for weapons and security guarantees against what their domestic populations are willing to tolerate. In addition, the deep and sustained US engagement that establishing a Palestinian state will require would delay even further the date on which America can put the Middle East on the 'backburner'. Without sustained and committed diplomatic engagement from the US, the regional consequences of Israel's war are likely to spread and intensify in unpredictable ways.

America's strained efforts to ignore Israel's many war crimes since October 7 are also imposing mounting costs of their own, both at home and abroad. Whatever claim Biden could make for rebuilding the West's moral leadership with his opposition to Russia has been destroyed, and much of the Global South views the US with contempt. There is no move that the US could make in defence of Ukraine that could possibly compensate for the blank, droning repetition of American politicians saying 'Israel has a right to defend itself' while phone screens are filled with videos of IDF soldiers dancing and cheering as they reduce yet another Palestinian university to rubble. Biden's efforts to draw an analogy between Russia's attack on Ukraine and Al Aqsa Flood have been risible. Nine countries suspended or cut diplomatic ties with

³² 'After October 7th, Is Saudi–Israeli Normalization Just a Mirage?', Soufan Center, 14 February 2024.

Israel because of the war, and one African diplomat told journalists that America's veto of the UN ceasefire resolution 'told us that Ukrainian lives are more valuable than Palestinian ones'. 'We have definitely lost the battle in the Global South', one G7 diplomat said. 'Forget about rules, forget about world order. They won't ever listen to us again'.³³

There may be a touch of well-intentioned melodrama in statements like that. Surely *someone* will listen to the US again, given the right trade deal or arms package. But the Israel–Gaza war appears to be a watershed for American domestic politics as well. It has been years since there was so large a divide between public opinion and the behaviour of elected representatives on an issue of such importance. In Washington, the House of Representatives passed a December resolution declaring that anti-Zionism is a form of antisemitism, with the few Congressmen who are willing to speak up for peace being treated in roughly the same manner as Barbara Lee after her speech opposing the passage of the Authorization for Use of Military Force in September 2001. Meanwhile, a clear majority of Americans, including more than half of Republicans, support a permanent ceasefire. Protests have erupted across the country, and activists have successfully convinced a meaningful share of Democratic voters to write 'uncommitted' on their primary ballots. Biden's reelection campaign was always going to be a tricky affair, given his recent difficulties navigating press conferences and other public events that haven't been set on 'easy mode'. Now it is going to be harder, because many younger voters, people who should be part of the Democratic Party base, seem determined to disrupt as many campaign events as they can. Biden does not appear to have a plan for appeasing these voters. Informed at a January 2024 meeting that his poll numbers were dropping in Michigan and Georgia as a result of his support for Israel, Biden 'began to shout and swear'.³⁴

Tapas in Washington

As for the American press, it initially tried to portray Israel's war on Gaza as a standard foreign-policy morality play, with Hamas a horde of apolitical barbarians scurrying about in their dastardly tunnel system while

³³ Henry Foy, 'Rush by west to back Israel erodes developing countries' support for Ukraine', *FT*, 18 October 2023.

³⁴ 'Behind the scenes, Biden has grown angry and anxious about re-election effort', *NBC News*, 17 March 2024.

brave Israelis fought once again to defend themselves from a transhistorical antisemitism. Papers such as the *New York Times* overwhelmingly advanced Israel's account of the war, quoting Israeli sources more often than Palestinian ones, avoiding the active voice when describing how Palestinians died, and paying more attention to antisemitism than to violence and bigotry targeting Arabs and Muslims (there has been much more of the latter in the US since October 7). In one now-notorious incident, the *Times* tasked two inexperienced freelancers—one of them a recent college graduate who mostly wrote about food—with repackaging as investigative journalism Israeli propaganda about an alleged systematic campaign of sexual violence by Hamas on October 7.

As the war has progressed, however, and as Israel has made it clear it has no strategic vision beyond destroying as much of Gaza as possible, the political efficacy of these media tactics has decreased. How is one to believe the old line about the IDF being the world's most moral army when each week brings new photographs of Israeli soldiers giggling like fraternity creeps as they fondle lingerie they found in Palestinian homes? How is one supposed to take seriously the idea that antisemitism runs amok on America's streets when groups such as Jewish Voice for Peace have been at the forefront of recent protests and AIPAC has admitted it counts every pro-Palestinian protest as an antisemitic incident? It must be frustrating to the State Department that Netanyahu and the Israelis are so unwilling to make even a half-hearted effort to portray their war as a solemn and restrained defence of a besieged nation. Instead, the war appears on American television, laptop and phone screens as an orgy of violence, a revenge campaign of ethnic cleansing that satisfies those carrying it out precisely because of its gratuitousness.

Biden and the press have made slight adjustments to their tactics over the past few months. First, instead of solely portraying Israel's war as something it isn't (measured and heroic struggle against antisemitic psychosis), the American media began to acknowledge the war as a tragic situation while trying to skirt the issue of who bears responsibility for the tragedy. Administration spokespeople allowed that Palestinian civilians were in a desperate situation, that 'too many' women and children had died, that hunger in Gaza had become a serious problem, and that settler violence in the West Bank was concerning. They said they wished Israel would fight its war a bit differently but reminded reporters that it is a sovereign nation, ignoring the fact that Israel's decades

of belligerence have only been made possible by America's military largesse. During this period, Biden largely seemed to be playing for time, hoping that Israel's rage would exhaust itself in time for the war to not weigh too heavily on his reelection prospects in November.

Then, on April 2, Israel launched airstrikes on a convoy run by World Central Kitchen, a charity organization founded by celebrity chef José Andrés, killing seven of its workers. In addition to one Palestinian, the dead included three Britons, one Australian, a Pole and a dual citizen of the US and Canada. Condemnation from Washington, as well as from European capitals, was swift and severe. Thirty-seven Congressional Democrats, including ride-or-die Biden loyalist Nancy Pelosi, wrote a letter to Biden and Blinken urging that the US halt arms transfers to Israel. For the first time since October 7, Netanyahu found himself cornered into apologizing for the Israeli military's conduct, assuring the world that he 'deeply regrets the tragic incident', dismissing two officers, and reprimanding three others.

As Edward Luce put it with unnerving frankness in the *Financial Times*, 'The latest incident has affected Joe Biden in a way earlier ones did not':

Put simply, Andrés is a Washington celebrity. He was one of the pioneers of high-quality restaurants in an early 1990s Washington that had a well-deserved reputation for dowdy food. Andrés's Jaleo introduced Spanish-style *tapas* food to America's capital. In 2016, his restaurant, Minibar, was one of Washington's first batch to merit a two-star Michelin award. Among others, Nancy Pelosi, the former US Speaker, has nominated him for a Nobel Peace Prize.³⁵

That Biden could only be moved to pity by a war crime that personally affected the man who introduced tapas to Washington speaks volumes about the moral bankruptcy of his administration. Equally disturbing are the signs that he hopes blame for Israel's atrocities can be laid solely at the feet of Netanyahu, with America's support for the larger Zionist project evading any real modification. But Netanyahu is a perfect representation of the Zionist project, not a tragic or maniacal aberration from it. As the *New York Times* reported as late as February, more than 80 percent of Israelis still believed that the IDF was using 'adequate or too little force' in Gaza, and 88 percent of Jewish Israelis believed that 'the

³⁵ Edward Luce, 'Israel's José Andrés problem', *FT*, 5 April 2024.

number of Palestinians killed or wounded in Gaza is justified'.³⁶ Biden remains unwilling to acknowledge, much less confront, the extent to which Israel's war on Gaza is an authentic expression of the desires of Israeli society writ large.

'Global leadership'

One imagines that in Washington's ideal world, Israelis will eventually kick Netanyahu out of office and replace him with someone whose name and image will be unfamiliar. Though they will share Netanyahu's politics, they will be an unknown quantity in the eyes of most Americans, and this will make it possible for Blinken and Sullivan to project their fantasies about the kind of leader Israel *should* have onto them. The US will describe the new Prime Minister as a pragmatist, a reformer, someone whose commitment to Israel's defence remains unshakeable but who simultaneously regrets some of the excesses of his predecessor and recognizes the importance of at least performing basic concern for Palestinian civilians. The Israeli government will make conciliatory diplomatic gestures toward Saudi Arabia, Egypt and other reactionary regimes in the region, and while it will not be required to actually pursue concrete steps toward a Palestinian state, it will not display total contempt for the idea. It will stop throwing fuel onto the fire of global popular outrage. The new leader will be a figure to whom Democrats can point as they explain why continued support for Israel remains vital to America's national interest, buying the US time to oversee a negotiated settlement that reaffirms the permanent occupation of Palestine without having to call it that. It is a despairing, hopeless vision of the next several years. Should it come to pass, Biden will call it a historic success that reaffirms the importance of America's global leadership.

One should not discount the possibility that Biden will get what he wants. The war has permanently damaged his standing with American Arab and Muslim communities, particularly in crucial states such as Michigan and Minnesota, but it's still the case that his opponent is a man who ended his first term as the least popular president in the country's history. Trump is fundamentally a small-time crook who made it big, and it is obvious that a primary motivation behind his current presidential

³⁶ Steven Erlanger, 'Israelis, Newly Vulnerable, Remain Traumatized and Mistrustful', *New York Times*, 17 February 2004.

campaign is to keep himself out of jail. Americans have little desire to relive the chaotic atmosphere of his first term. They also have decades of experience in tuning out violence overseas, and if Biden is able to extract a few concessions from the Israeli government by mid-year, his campaign may be able to persuade some fence-sitters that he made a good-faith effort to ease the suffering of Palestinian civilians.

Even if Biden does eke out a victory this autumn, however, the dream of American hegemonic rejuvenation in the twenty-first century is still in trouble. To begin with, there is little evidence that Biden has begun to lay the foundation for a durable majority that could keep Democrats in power over the course of several election cycles, and this makes it unlikely that the United States is going to see any respite from the whip-lash political dynamics that have militated against longer-term strategic policy-making over the past decade. More centrally, however, the first pillar of the Biden administration's geopolitical strategy, 'a foreign policy for the middle class', which amounts in practice to a protectionist green-military Keynesianism targeting China, has been meaningfully undercut by the consequences of pursuing the second pillar, democracies versus autocracies. The Russia-Ukraine war has exacerbated an inflationary surge around the world, including within the United States. Even with historically low levels of unemployment and strong wage growth (at least relative to recent history), Americans have been outraged by levels of inflation not seen in decades, and their views on Biden's stewardship of the economy are particularly negative. Whether Biden can turn public opinion around on this front now that inflation has eased remains to be seen, but much political damage has already been done and time is running out.

Biden didn't just promise to ensure that America's economy remains the world's largest, or that America's military remains the world's strongest. He promised to do what Giovanni Arrighi said is required of a hegemon in *The Long Twentieth Century*. Hegemonic power, Arrighi wrote, is 'the power associated with dominance expanded by the exercise of "intellectual and moral leadership"'. What distinguishes it from its non-hegemonic competitors is that only the hegemon can *plausibly* claim to be advancing global interests other than its own. 'The claim of the dominant group to represent the general interest is always more or less fraudulent', Arrighi writes. 'Nevertheless . . . we shall speak of

hegemony only when the claim is at least partly true and adds something to the power of the dominant group'.³⁷

American hegemony certainly lives on for now in Europe, where compliant NATO allies continue to fall over one another in their rush to hollow out social services and buy American arms. And the US may be able to retain economic dominance in a relative sense even if it never manages to reverse the slowdown in global growth, so long as its own economic power weakens less than that of its rivals. But after Gaza, America can no longer credibly claim global 'hegemony' in Arrighi's sense. Biden's support for Israel, motivated both by strategic considerations and what appears to be a real inability on his part to see Palestinians as fully human, flies in the face of both American and global public opinion. Europe may hold on to America's coattails for a while yet, but in the rest of the world, continued American supremacy will be based primarily on coercion. Arrighi identified the catastrophe of America's invasion of Iraq as the turning point: 'The unravelling of the neoconservative Project for a New American Century', he wrote, 'has for all practical purposes resulted in the terminal crisis of US hegemony—that is, in its transformation into mere domination'.³⁸ If it is true that Iraq marked the point at which American hegemony actually changed into domination, then perhaps Gaza marks the point at which Americans finally realized it.

³⁷ Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century*, London and New York 1994, pp. 29–30.

³⁸ Arrighi, *Long Twentieth Century*, p. 379.