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I would now like to turn to somebody right here in Abu Dhabi, and that is Jo Joffe, a long-time observer of American policy and the author of a book called, *The Myth of American Policy* and another called *The Myth of the American Decline*. I wonder if the myth of American decline is still true or has it been disproven, is America in decline?

Josef Joffe

US foreign policy can be as surprising as the 2022 US midterms, given the cyclical nature of US grand strategy – with new administrations starting out afresh. Instead of playing the prophet, I want to talk patterns to situate the Biden Administration in the ebb and flow of the three most recent cycles: from Bush to Obama, then to Trump and now to Biden. Usually, each new cycle represents a reaction to the mishaps of the previous team, which does not make for continuity.

Cycle One was George W. or Gulliver Unbound who began to throw his weight around because the main counterweight, the Soviet Union, had disintegrated on Christmas Day 1991. Think three Mideast wars the U.S. probably would not have unleashed while Soviet power in this contested area had still been intact.

That sets the stage for the next cycle – a swing back toward the retrenchment of American power, meaning a Gulliver who ropes himself and shies away from power projection. Here is one surprise: There are more similarities between Obama and Trump than we think. What could these two polar opposites possibly have in common?

One, both pull troops from Europe.

Two, both badmouth the Atlantic Alliance. Obama calls the Europeans “free riders” who “aggravate me.” Trump calls NATO “obsolete.”

Three, Obama veers toward protectionism with punitive tariffs on China; Trump does so with his steel and aluminum tariffs on both EU and China

Four, both flirt with the Bad Guys in order to reduce the costs of America’s global role. Obama hopes to rope in Iran while cold-shouldering Israel and Saudi-Arabia; Trump plays footsie with Putin and Kim Yong-un.



So, the reassertion of American power under Bush turns into retrenchment – softly under Obama, brutally under Demolition Man Trump. Alas, the fruits do not ripen. For Bush, regime change and democracy recede into Dreamland. Under Obama, Iran keeps expanding from Iraq to the Mediterranean and working diligently on the Bomb. Did MAGA Man Trump do better? North Korea kept building long-range missiles, threatening Japan and South Korea, two old American allies. Putin grabs Crimea and Ukraine’s South-East in 2014.

Let’s situate Biden on the spectrum of reassertion vs. retraction. Where does this most left-wing president since Roosevelt stand? In honor of my brilliant friend Pierre Hassner, who died four years ago, I will imitate his characteristic style, a series of “on the one hand” and “on the other hand:”

- a. On the one hand, Biden immediately stops and reverses troop withdrawals from Europe. Instead of badmouthing NATO like Obama and Trump, he mends fences.
- b. On the other hand, he returns to Obama’s Iran approach by trying to revive, almost desperately, the nuclear deal with Iran.
- c. On the one hand, Biden tries to tighten the bond with Japan and South Korea, which Trump neglected, also tightening AUKUS, the trio with Australia and the UK.
- d. On the other, Biden pooh-poohs Trump’s most significant diplomatic achievement, the Abraham Accords, a modern “renversement des alliances” that joins the Gulfies to Israel, with Riyadh as a silent partner. The term “Abraham Accords” disappears from the Administration’s vocabulary.
- e. Toward China, Biden is tougher than Obama and Trump. This time, the previously symbolic “pivot to the Pacific” is for real. On the other hand, Biden rules out a clear commitment to Taiwan. The watchword is “ambiguity.”
- f. On the one hand, Biden did cozy up to Europe. On the other, the Inflation Reduction Act is protectionism with a fancy new label. The gist is that non-US companies will not profit from lavish subsidies, which puts them at a competitive disadvantage on the U.S. market. Worse, the Act may force Europeans to export production and jobs to the U.S.
- g. Finally, Ukraine. On the one hand, Ukraine would be a goner by now if it had not been showered with wondrous U.S. gifts of battlefield intelligence, high-precision artillery, anti-air assets and billions of cash. Plus: Without U.S. leadership and protection, the Europeans would not have risked provoking Putin by arming the Ukrainians. Just remember how reticent both Berlin and Paris were.
- h. On the other hand, the past month has seen US feelers to the Kremlin. In November, Biden suddenly threw up the term “compromise.” A few days ago, when Macron was in Washington, Biden said: “I’m prepared to speak with Mr. Putin if in fact there is an interest in him deciding that he’s looking for a way to end the war.”



My view of these oblique offers: As the Russians are trying to annihilate Ukrainian cities and civilians, while preparing for a new offensive, such hints of are the wrong moves at the wrong time. Predictably, Putin, said “nyet” to talks, having shifted from ground to air warfare, which spares his ill-equipped and badly trained troops.

So, who is Joe Biden? Is he a retractionist like Obama or an “America firster” like Trump who thought he could to “make America great again” by cutting costs and commitments. Recall that Trump engineered the pull-out from Afghanistan, which Biden executed.

In the economic arena, Biden and Trump could be twins: American welfare and workers come first. On this level, bitter ideological enemies like Democrats and Republicans are two peas in a pod, left and right together. It will further weaken the free-trade system the U.S. built and maintained after WW II.

So, my beloved friend Pierre Hassner would not be off the mark with his dialectics. American grand strategy has never followed a straight line. The cycles of reassertion and retrenchment are as American as apple pie. Entanglement starts with the French alliance against Britain in the War of Independence and soon veers toward isolationism and internal conquest from the Appalachians to the Pacific.

Given such gyrations, only fools would make predictions, especially in a period inflation, energy scarcities, broken supply chains, and soaring public debt. Plus, a Western alliance that may tire of the Ukraine War, as may the U.S. when the Republicans will have the upper hand in the House next January.

But if forced to take a stand, I would end thus: Given the choice between Bush, Obama and Trump on the one hand and Biden on the other, my vote goes to Biden. Though he is an ideologue on domestic politics, he does understand how the world has changed from unipolarity under Bush to the two-and-a-half power world the U.S., China and, way behind, Russia. It is a fierce competition, with power, both military and economic as hardest currency. Biden’s mentor Obama didn’t quite fathom the new dynamics.

On balance, Biden has performed better than his three predecessors. The name of the new game is a balance restored, the containment of the revisionist trio China Russia and Iran – not Gulliver Unbound but Gulliver seeking to restore of world order. It is a new epoch, and it will be a long haul. So, we will have lots to talk about in the next 5 World Policy Conferences.

Jim Bitterman

Ladies and gentlemen, I am not sure President Biden would like to be known as a pea in the pod with Donald Trump, but you never know.