

The Emerging Biden Doctrine

Democracy, Autocracy, and the Defining Clash of Our Time

By Hal Brands

On his recent trip to Europe, President Joe Biden hammered home the defining theme of his foreign policy. The U.S.-Chinese rivalry, he said, is part of a larger “contest with autocrats” over “whether democracies can compete . . . in the rapidly changing twenty-first century.” It wasn’t a rhetorical flourish. Biden has repeatedly argued the world has reached an “inflection point” that will determine whether this century marks another era of democratic dominance or an age of autocratic ascendancy. Tomorrow’s historians, he has predicted, will be “doing their doctoral theses on the issue of who succeeded: autocracy or democracy?”

Biden hasn’t always seen the world this way. In 2019, he mocked the suggestion that China was a serious competitor, let alone the leading edge of an epochal ideological challenge. But his claim that the central clash of our time is the contest between democratic and authoritarian systems of government appears genuine—and has profound implications for U.S. foreign policy and geopolitics.

For the Biden administration, the concept captures what is driving the United States’ relations with its principal rivals and what is at stake. It links great-power competition to the revitalization of American democracy and the fight against transnational scourges, such as corruption and COVID-19. And it focuses the United States on a truly grand strategy of fortifying the democratic world against the most serious set of threats it has confronted in generations.

The question is whether the administration can now turn this vision into a reality. Biden has identified the defining strategic challenge of the twenty-first century, but the problems—both inherent and self-created—are already daunting.

A WORLD SAFE FOR AUTOCRACY

President Donald Trump may have turned Washington toward great-power competition, but Biden has put that issue within a larger strategic frame. Until the pandemic struck, Trump often seemed to see the U.S.-Chinese rivalry primarily as a fight over the terms of trade. By contrast, Biden views that competition as part of “a fundamental debate” between those who believe that “autocracy is the best way forward” and those who believe that “democracy will and must prevail.”

The community of democratic nations confronts three interrelated challenges. First is the threat from authoritarian powers—Russia and particularly China. These countries are contesting U.S. power around the world and menacing democratic nations from eastern Europe to the Taiwan Strait. Yet the challenge they pose is as much ideological as geopolitical. Different models of order at home produce different visions of order abroad: Russia and China want to weaken, fragment, and replace the existing international system because its foundational liberal principles are antithetical to their illiberal domestic practices. The danger, then, is that Moscow and Beijing will make the world safe for autocracy in ways that make it unsafe for democracy.

Russia is using cyberattacks and disinformation to knock democracies off balance and turn their citizens against one another, just as liberal societies have become increasingly tribal and polarized. China uses its market power to punish criticism—that is, free speech—in advanced democracies from Europe to Australia; provides the world’s autocrats with the tools and techniques of repression; and is rewriting the rules of international organizations to protect and even privilege authoritarianism. Most menacingly, Beijing is making generational outlays in technologies, such as 5G telecommunications and artificial intelligence, meant to spread China’s autocratic influence and propel it past its democratic rivals. The bottom line is that a world led by empowered, aggressive autocracies will be, as President Franklin Roosevelt warned, a “shabby and dangerous place” for those who value freedom.

The second threat comes from transnational problems that take on added gravity in a contest of systems. COVID-19 is not simply a once-in-a-century pandemic; it is a challenge to the idea that democracies can effectively respond to the most pressing perils its citizens face. Cross-border corruption is not just a threat to good governance; it is an evil that Moscow, Beijing, and other authoritarians exploit to expand their sway and weaken their rivals. The divide between great-power competition and transnational issues is artificial: democracies won’t win the former without addressing the latter.

The third threat is the decay of democracy from within. In recent years, the United States has seen the election of an unabashedly illiberal president and a violent effort to overturn a democratic election. Throughout the liberal world, antidemocratic sentiments and dissatisfaction with representative institutions have reached heights not seen since World War II. These trends are alarming in their own right; they also leave the United States and its allies more vulnerable to autocratic predation. This crisis of democratic governance at home is of a piece with the crisis of democratic influence abroad.

THE BIDEN DOCTRINE

This three-fold challenge suggests a three-fold response—elements of which can be seen in the Biden administration’s early moves. First, the United States must strengthen the cohesion and resilience of the democratic community against its autocratic rivals and make such democratic solidarity truly global, since so many aspects of the threat require a global response. Second, it must lead the world’s democracies in addressing transnational problems that no nation can solve on its own. And it must build a “position of strength” for global rivalry by reinvesting in its own competitiveness and demonstrating that democracies can still deliver for their citizens.

The Biden foreign policy has been centered on putting this sweeping concept of American strategy—rooted in the inescapable fact that the supremacy of democracy is more imperiled than at any time in generations—into operation. Whereas many of Trump’s worst international relationships were with the United States’ closest allies, Biden has prioritized repairing those alliances as shields in a global democratic phalanx. He has sought to smooth diplomatic and trade disputes with Europe to create a stronger united front against Russia and China and has worked with allies in Europe and the Indo-Pacific to signal that aggression against Taiwan could cost the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) dearly. An early summit of the Group of 7 produced common language on the Chinese threat and plans for an infrastructure program that will promote transparent, high-quality projects in the developing world—a democratic answer to Beijing’s Belt and Road Initiative.

The administration has also fostered hubs of democratic cooperation on key global challenges. Under Biden, the Quad and the G-7 have announced plans to distribute nearly two billion COVID-19 vaccines to developing nations. The administration is preparing a multilateral push to counter corruption and the illicit financial flows that Russian President Vladimir Putin, among other autocrats, has so skillfully weaponized. Although Biden had earlier talked up a global “summit of democracies” to take on these and other issues, so far he has relied on smaller, existing groups that can deliver tangible progress now and perhaps set the stage for grander endeavors later.

Biden has taken the same tack in the technology competition. For now, the administration has downgraded the idea of creating a D-10, T-12, or some other large, formal democratic coalition to counter autocratic influences on technology. Instead, it is working with select countries and groupings—South Korea on semiconductors and 5G and 6G technology, the EU on aligning technology and trade policy, Japan on ensuring an open global Internet, NATO on countering cyberattacks and disinformation—to build democratic cooperation from the ground up.

Meanwhile, the administration has been pushing back, often multilaterally, against the most egregious forms of authoritarian repression and predation. The president reportedly threatened Putin with grave consequences if Russian cyberattacks against critical infrastructure continue. Washington joined the EU in imposing sanctions on Belarus after the government of President Alexander Lukashenko forced down a plane carrying a wanted dissident—an example of the extraterritorial repression that Russia, China, and other authoritarians are using to hound their critics and entrench their rule. And Biden’s team worked with Canada, the United Kingdom, and the EU to sanction CCP officials involved in the horrifying repression in Xinjiang—thereby triggering a “Wolf Warrior” meltdown that blew up an investment agreement Beijing had signed with Brussels only months before.

At home, Biden has been pursuing investments in scientific research and development, digital and physical infrastructure, and other areas to improve competitiveness and address working- and middle-class alienation. His promise of a “foreign policy for the middle class” is meant to show that global engagement can pay for working families, and his push for a global minimum tax would, administration officials argue, help democracies invest more in their citizens. From Biden’s perspective, these measures represent down payments on the sort of domestic rejuvenation and reform that once helped the democracies win another contest of systems during the Cold War.

THE HARD PART

Yet just as the outlines of a strategy are coming into view, so are the challenges and shortcomings. Most obviously, Biden’s framing plays better with some audiences than with others. The strategy is premised on the idea that the United States can best check the authoritarian advance through deeper solidarity with established democracies. But hemming in Russian and Chinese power, whether militarily or diplomatically, will also require cooperation with imperfect or downright autocratic governments in countries from Poland and Turkey to Vietnam and the Philippines. This need not be a fatal problem: Washington made alliances with like-minded democracies the core of its Cold War strategy while also building productive, if transactional, relationships with quasi democracies and outright tyrannies. But it underscores that

there is no one-size-fits-all approach to coalition building—and that principled strategies still require pragmatic compromises.

Even with core democratic allies, closing ranks could prove harder than the administration expects. Biden can quickly reap the gains that come from ending fratricidal trade wars or withholding praise from a Russian dictator. And with Europe especially, there is clear scope for cooperation on issues such as investment screening. Yet rallying even close democratic allies will still be a challenge. European exporters are banking on a post-pandemic recovery powered by Chinese purchases; there are persistent transatlantic divisions on privacy, data, and other technology issues. Getting joint statements of concern about potential Chinese aggression against Taiwan or economic coercion of Australia is comparatively easy; fashioning concrete multilateral responses will be more difficult. And moves to shore up the free world against one threat can weaken it against another: the Biden administration dropped its opposition to the Nord Stream 2 pipeline in hopes of bringing Berlin on board vis-à-vis Beijing, but in doing so, it allowed Moscow to increase its leverage over vulnerable democracies in eastern Europe.

Focusing on the ideological and technological struggle could also distract the administration from equally pressing military dangers. The United States could, after all, lose the contest of systems by failing to contain authoritarian aggressors and defend democratic outposts in eastern Europe and the western Pacific. A bipartisan commission on U.S. defense strategy warned in 2018 that the United States simply does not have the military power necessary to meet its commitments around the Eurasian periphery. The Pentagon is facing a gaping window of vulnerability in the Taiwan Strait. Yet the administration has shown comparatively little urgency on the military front: its first Pentagon budget request is flat (in real terms) and shortchanges near-term measures to harden the United States' posture in the Pacific. Today's rivalries are about more than military power—but democratic values won't save the free world in a gunfight.

Finally, the connection between the foreign and domestic components of the strategy is not as seamless as the administration claims. In Biden's view, improving the economic fortunes of the middle class is insurance against a Trumpist resurrection and a way of strengthening the domestic foundations of U.S. diplomacy. Yet among the practical results have been a "Buy American" edict that looks like "America first" with Democratic characteristics and an underwhelming trade policy that, so far, has left many countries—particularly in Asia—wondering if the United States is really back. If Biden's strategy doesn't support an expansive, ambitious notion of prosperity, it won't do much for the cohesion and power of the free world.

Give Biden this much: he has correctly identified the overarching challenge of the era. Now comes the hard part. He must make his strategy real, and make it work.

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