

From the ashes of Afghanistan, a 'Biden Doctrine' emerges

A narrow US focus on national interest puts Taiwan and Japan on edge

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NEW YORK -- When U.S. President Joe Biden told the world Monday that he did not regret withdrawing from Afghanistan, he supplied his rationale and laid out the guiding principles of his foreign policy.

No fighting indefinitely in a conflict not in America's national interest. No doubling down on a foreign civil war. No attempting to remake a country by endlessly deploying American forces. On a tactical level, he supports counterterrorism but not counterinsurgency and will use over-the-horizon capability to target direct threats to the U.S.

These pillars may one day be known as the Biden Doctrine.

The principles differ markedly from those laid out by former President George W. Bush, who ordered the invasion of Afghanistan nearly 20 years ago. Bush's doctrine positioned the U.S. as a "benevolent hegemon" that should spread freedom and democracy throughout the world, lessening threats to the homeland.

The new parameters of American overseas engagement, along with the chaos in Afghanistan, will be closely watched by Washington's allies, analysts said.

"If you compare the Bush and Biden administrations, there are big differences in terms of nation-building, spreading democracy, helping other countries so that those threats don't manifest," said Japan expert and RAND Corp. senior political scientist Jeffrey Hornung.

A key characteristic of the Biden Doctrine may be the focus on vital national interests, Hornung said -- but in the speech, "he never said what that was."

China has been quick to exploit the mayhem in Afghanistan for its own purposes.

The hawkish Global Times, a newspaper affiliated with Communist Party mouthpiece People's Daily, said in an editorial that Washington's abandonment of the Kabul regime should be a warning sign to Taiwan.

"Once a cross-Straits war breaks out while the mainland seizes the island with forces, the U.S. would have to have a much greater determination than it had for Afghanistan, Syria, and Vietnam if it wants to interfere," the editorial read.

Michael Green, senior vice president for Asia and Japan chair at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, called the situation in Afghanistan "an unforced error by Biden" and said that "the debacle does threaten to sap the confidence of the U.S. and our allies."

But "I do not think this will fundamentally alter the solid public support for the U.S.-Japan and U.S.-South Korea alliances," Green said. "I also don't think it will be a political victory for isolationists."

"The 'endless war' retreat crowd will argue this is what always happens when we intervene abroad, and the internationalists will say this is what happens when we retreat," he said. "So a draw in the debate."

One question on allies' minds will be whether a contingency in the Taiwan Strait -- where the U.S. is not directly attacked and victim Taiwan is not a treaty ally -- can be considered a vital American national interest.

Hornung noted that Biden's foreign policy speeches have focused heavily on a great-power competition with China. "If great-power competition and standing up to hegemony is one of the vital interests, then that's where the U.S. will put the flag down and say, 'You're not crossing us,'" he said.

Military band members play in Beijing's Tiananmen Square. Biden has placed the great power competition with China at the center of his foreign policy. © Reuters

Mike Mochizuki, the Japan-U.S. relations chair at the Elliott School of International Affairs at George Washington University, said: "There's a difference between using military forces to promote democracy in a country that has not had a democratic tradition, and Taiwan, which would be a case of defending a democratic system."

One lesson for Taiwan, however, would be that "if they feel that they want to preserve their system and to resist the Chinese use of military force, the No. 1 responsibility lies with them, and not with the United States," Mochizuki said. "That applies to every ally and partner that the United States has," he said.

For Japan, which relies on the security alliance with Washington for its defense, the presence of 50,000-plus American military personnel could constitute a "vital national interest" for the U.S. if it were attacked.

Tom Shugart, an adjunct senior fellow at the Center for a New American Security and an expert on the Chinese military threat, also rejected the notion that the failure to prevent a Taliban takeover in Afghanistan could give any indication of potential American actions in the Taiwan Strait.

"Pax Americana was established by, and has been maintained by, American power on the high seas," he said. "When Pax Americana ends, it will be because American dominance ended there, not in the mountains of central Asia."

Shugart, however, did warn of the danger that China may mistakenly underestimate the U.S. resolve to defend Taiwan.

China may assess inaccurately the firmness with which the U.S. will stand behind Taiwan, "should they gain unjustified confidence based on their observations of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan," Shugart said.

"Now, if Taiwan doesn't fight, that's another matter," he said. "But we've known that to be the case since long before we watched the Afghan government fold. Bottom line, I am not any more worried than before I watched the Afghan government collapse essentially without a fight, and seemingly mostly bought off by the Taliban."

Counterterrorism is much more narrowly focused than counterinsurgency, University of Bristol lecturer Simon Frankel Pratt noted.

"The era of expensive and long-term military and state-building adventures is over for the foreseeable future; future operations will look much more like existing deployments in Africa, which have a smaller footprint and rely more heavily on existing local security forces as partners," he said.

About a minute and a half into his speech Monday, Biden declared that "our only vital national interest in Afghanistan remains today what it has always been: preventing a terrorist attack on American homeland." But this was not necessarily Afghans' understanding over the years, Brookings Institution fellow Madiha Afzal said.

"It wasn't clear to the Afghan people that America's efforts in Afghanistan were limited to counterterrorism -- because America did help the Afghans build institutions during its presence there, even if nation-building wasn't the original or the intended mission," she said. "To many Afghans -- especially those of the younger generation and those in urban areas -- who benefited from these new institutions, America's sudden departure and the takeover, once again, of the Taliban will feel like abandonment, and a betrayal of what they had come to believe was their future during the American presence there."

In 1996, neoconservatives William Kristol and Robert Kagan [wrote](#) in Foreign Affairs that America's role in a post-Cold War world should be "benevolent global hegemony," in which it actively promotes American principles of governance abroad, such as democracy, free markets and respect for liberty.

The authors said the first objective of U.S. foreign policy should be to preserve and enhance its strategic and ideological predominance "by strengthening America's security, supporting its friends, advancing its interests, and standing up for its principles around the world."

It formed the basis of the Bush Doctrine. A quarter century and two wars later, American foreign policy looks to be on a decidedly new path.