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USA

Biden: “Empire Is Back”...

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NOT THAT IT ever left, of course: The United States' vocation to rule the world is a constant fact of global life and its multiple crises. What then is the meaning of President Joe Biden's proclamation that "America is back," warmly greeted in many capitals and among elite opinion-makers?

Biden's mantra is taken to mean a return from Trump's transactional chaos and corruption to what's called the "rule-based international order." As to what that order means in the lives of the global majority, Nicole Aschoff has it right ("The Biden Doctrine," Jacobin, Winter 2021):

"In promising to reconstruct a close approximation of the Obama-era global order, Biden is promising to restore a violent, rapacious system that had increasingly lost its legitimacy.

"Trump is such an obnoxious, dishonorable figure that it is easy to lose sight of the deep continuities between his administration, previous administrations, and the likely proclivities of the Biden team: continued interference in Latin American governments, indifference to crippling Third World debt, blithe disregard for the massive corporate theft of collective wealth through offshore tax havens, and a ready willingness to go to the ends of the earth to protect Wall Street while throwing ordinary people under the bus."

On domestic issues, the enormous U.S. economic and public health crisis, as well as Republican obstruction, has pushed the Democratic administration in certain "progressive" directions. The same is not true of Washington's foreign policy. What stands out here on first look is its sickening moral depravity.

Inherited from Trump's gang, brutal sanctions on the people of Iran and Venezuela continue, while there's no sign yet of lifting the criminal U.S. economic blockade of Cuba. As Kevin Young writes on Venezuela: "U.S. support for the far-right forces of (Juan) Gaidó and (Leopoldo) Lopez is intended to prevent a deal between (president) Maduro and the more pragmatic elements of the opposition [which] might alleviate Venezuela's economic crisis, but it could leave Maduro in power and thus derail the U.S.'s regime change agenda." ("Smarter Empire," March 8, 2021)

Meanwhile no sanctions have been placed on the murderous Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, Mohammad bin Salman, on the pretext that Washington is "recalibrating the relationship" with Saudi Arabia, while preserving its essentials — and maintaining arms sales to the United Arab Emirates, as the country of Yemen dies. There are too many other dirty examples of "geopolitics" to list here.

Without reference to ethical considerations, we must also look at the real conflicts and contradictions facing the leading imperialist power. These are particularly important given the rising power of China as well as economic and cybersecurity challenges. Some of these carry longterm threats of war and mutual destruction.

This requires digging beneath daily rhetoric and news cycle noise. Strategically, "deep continuities" between Trump and Biden outweigh the differences. For example, while the big tweet liked playing tough on TV when he threatened "Little Rocket Man" or bombed an empty airfield in Syria, Biden in his first 30 days already launched an air strike in Iraq that killed reportedly 22 Iraqi Shia militia fighters.

Biden's intent was a warning signal to Iran, not starting a real war. Neither Biden nor Trump are serious warmakers by intention — even though such actions could trigger an apocalypse by accident or miscalculation. That is also

certainly true of other smoldering conflicts, e.g. between U.S. and Chinese naval forces in the South China Sea, or the half-hidden Israeli and Iranian cyber conflict and sabotage of each other’s shipping.

It does appear, if carried through, that Biden will end the U.S. war in Afghanistan by the 9/11 anniversary — a 20-year defeat for U.S. power, a war that could never have been “won” — and the longer it lasted, the more it inflicted devastation on Afghanistan and its population.

Conflicts and Contradictions

Notoriously, Trump was contemptuous of the U.S. strategic partners in Europe for their blatant failure to sufficiently impoverish their own populations for the sake of ramped-up military spending. Trump’s trashing of NATO and peremptory withdrawal from the Paris climate accord horrified the strategic partners of the United States, while appealing to his nativist and climate-change-denying domestic base.

Sabotaging the Iran nuclear deal (Joint Comprehensive Program of Action, JCPOA) made the world, and particularly the Middle East, a more dangerous place. This angered the European powers — while exposing their incapacity to do much about it — as well as drawing China and Iran closer together as Tehran turns to Chinese investment and assistance in return for Iranian oil at a discounted price.

Trump’s strategic game of course was consummating the long-gestating anti-Iran axis of Israel, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. A Hillary Clinton administration would have worked more discreetly to develop that same alliance, although without the bombastic open provocation of Trump’s “deal of the century” that publicly throws Palestine under the tank treads.

In the Middle East arena of permanent crisis and shifting alliances, U.S. policy remains, as always, cynically indifferent to Israel’s destruction of Palestine. We can expect Biden’s team to return to more conventional postures of imperial diplomacy (from which the Palestinian people, for example, can expect exactly nothing). But on restoring the Iran deal, Biden is caught in the trick bag that Trump created.

Israel is doing everything, both secretly and openly in the sabotage of the Natanz facility, to destroy the negotiations. Iran for its part has now accelerated its nuclear enrichment. A new deal requires lifting Trump’s crippling additional sanctions on Iran, a rupture which Biden is unwilling to make as it would look like “weakness” — and the suffering of Iran’s population is of no concern. The permanent loss of the JCPOA is looming, with dangerous implications.

The serious conflicts confronting U.S. imperialism today would be challenging even if they weren’t converging together, and even if Trump hadn’t left the United States in a weakened and declining position on a number of fronts.

The central axis of global rivalry today is between the established U.S. power and the rising one of China. This struggle differs in a crucial respect from the old U.S.-Soviet conflict, which was political and military but not essentially economic, as the bureaucratic Soviet bloc economies were insulated and overwhelmingly weaker. Today’s China is a rising economic as well as political-military power, even though the United States remains clearly dominant.

China’s rapidly growing technological capacity and commercial reach create a host of competitive and strategic issues — some generally positive as in supplying COVID vaccines, others less so as when China buys up agricultural assets in the Global South or bullies its neighbors in fishing waters, repeating some classic techniques of

Western raw-material extraction and settler colonialism. Not only in Asia but in Africa and Latin America, Chinese investment and development projects are successfully competing with U.S. and European competition — while creating their own social and environmental contradictions, too.

At the same time, Western dependence on China for crucial supply chains (from rare-earth elements to N95 masks and PPE for frontline medical workers!) are forcing the United States and Europe to figure out rebuilding their domestic capacities.

The U.S. and international left faces the complex and tricky task of speaking uncompromisingly against the Chinese regime’s brutal policies in Xinjiang and Tibet, and its broken promises and repression in Hong Kong, without playing into Washington’s exploitation of these issues for its own hegemonic purposes. (For an excellent resource, see the Hong Kong solidarity activist website <https://lausan.hk>.)

A secondary but important arena is the U.S.-Russia conflict. In contrast with China’s Xi Jinping, Russia’s president-for-life Putin rules over a society in deep social decline, utterly incapable of engaging in economic competition with U.S. capital. Its military capacities are significant regionally (in the Syrian holocaust and on the Ukrainian border for example), but globally weak in comparison with the United States. In asymmetrical rivalry, however, Russia has sophisticated capacity in terms of cyber espionage and malicious mischief, including the ability to disrupt other countries’ political processes — as, of course, U.S. imperialism has been doing for at least 75 years.

Most pressing among the profound global challenges are the inextricably combined COVID-19 pandemic and climate crises, both of which will persist: COVID until, at the very least, the world is effectively vaccinated along with adequate preparation for new outbreaks, and the climate emergency for the remainder of this century, assuming we survive it.

Environmental degradation and runaway warming (with melting permafrost, destruction of forests, and northward migration of pathogens among other consequences) effectively guarantee new pandemics, as does corporate mono-crop agriculture. And if Biden’s program projects a reasonable, although overdue, first step toward controlling COVID, it doesn’t remotely grasp the environmental emergency. (“Carbon neutral by 2050” will not cut it.)

Here again, a rupture with policy and practice entrenched in the post-World War II “Permanent War Economy,” and doctrines of unlimited economic expansion at any global environmental and social cost, are essential — yet beyond the capabilities of capitalist governance.

Imperialism Comes Home

The reality of imperialism for the lives of the world’s people is literally brought home at the southern U.S. border where thousands of asylum seekers and refugees every day are seeking entry. As the worst obscenities of the Trump administration are now gone — its sadistic pleasure in tearing families apart and imprisoning children in cages, its gleeful and undisguised racism — the essential realities come into clearer focus.

Alarmed by the flow of migrants and rightwing blowback, Biden and Vice-President Harris pledge to address “the underlying causes” that propel migration from Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador in particular. But U.S. policies themselves are the critical factors that have entrenched death-squad and drug-cartel regimes in those countries, and blocked the possible revolutionary changes that might have liberated them. As a result, the only decent course is to LET THE REFUGEES IN.

Kevin Young puts it well: “Admitting a few more refugees and taking some climate action will have positive impact on people’s lives. Unruly popular movements may force bigger changes to policy. Yet given the magnitude of the destruction that U.S. governments have visited on Latin America and the Caribbean, what stands out is the vast gulf between what Biden is likely to do and what is owed to the people of the region, who deserve far more than just a smarter empire.”

Unaccompanied children, and whole families, are fleeing from U.S. “bipartisanship” in action: The Honduran regime of Juan Orlando Hernandez (JOH) came to power following a 2009 coup that was warmly greeted by Hillary Clinton, then Secretary of State under Obama. In 2017, when Hondurans were voting for an opposition reform candidate, the Trump administration nodded approvingly as the count was halted and the president declared “reelected.”

Environmental and Indigenous activists in Honduras have been murdered by the hundreds. Both JOH and his brother Tony Hernandez are named as drug criminals in the United States, where a federal court has just imposed a life sentence for Tony following his conviction.

We hear repeatedly that the United States is, or must return to being, that mythical “shining city on the hill” celebrated by Ronald Reagan during the glorious 1980s. That golden age was when the United States supported both Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden, while sponsoring the genocidal counterrevolutionary wars in Central America the results of which have brought those desperate migrants fleeing northward.

That’s imperialism: the metaphorical “shining city” dumping its garbage, raw sewage and toxic waste, both literally and figuratively, on the peoples down the hill, including much of its own population. This system needs to be fought — regardless of which capitalist party rules at the moment — for our own and humanity’s survival.

Source: May-June 2021, [ATC 212](#).

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