

America's 'Suez Moment': Another Strategic Mistake Would be Its Last. Biden's "Rules Based" "World Disorder"

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*In 2021, **President Joe Biden** truly reaped a bitter harvest from the strategic foreign policy errors of four of his predecessors. But Washington would do well to think before it makes its next move*

"America has just had its Suez Crisis," commented a member of the Iranian delegation at the nuclear talks in Vienna about the fall of [Afghanistan](#) to the Taliban, "but it has yet to see it."

It's not just the fall of Kabul.

In 2021, President Joe Biden truly reaped a bitter harvest from the strategic foreign policy errors of four of his predecessors. As he was the vice president for one of them, [Barack Obama](#), he has trouble seeing this as well. The seeds of each of the major global conflict zones post - Afghanistan, Ukraine, Taiwan, and Iran were planted long ago.

What unravelled this year was no less than three decades of bungled US global governance.

Each US president in the post-Soviet period shared the belief that he had the file to himself. It was not something to be shared at the UN Security Council. He was the commander-in-chief of the largest, best-equipped and most mobile armed force in the world, one that could stage over the horizon attacks with devastating accuracy.

The US president controls [750 military bases](#) in 80 different countries. He also had the biggest pocket, [the world's reserve currency](#), so, ergo, he could now set the rules.

What could possibly go wrong?

With that belief came two assumptions that proved to be fatally flawed: **that the US monopoly on the use of force would last forever - it ended with [Russia's](#)**

[intervention in Syria](#) – and that the US could continue to enforce a “**rules-based**” world order – so long as it continued to make the rules. Biden has quietly buried both assumptions by admitting that great powers will be forced [to “manage” their competition](#) to avoid conflict that no one can win.

But hang on a moment. There is something not quite right here.

The cause and effect theory

Major conflicts, which have [the potential to produce tank battles](#) not seen since World War II, like Ukraine, do not just happen.

There is cause and effect. The cause was the unilateral but at the time uncontroversial decision to [expand Nato eastwards in the 1990s](#), abandoning the model of a largely demilitarised and missile-free Eastern Europe [that had been discussed with](#) president Mikhail [Gorbachev](#) a decade earlier.

This was done to give new meaning to Nato, a military pact whose purpose died when its enemy did. Complete rubbish was talked about Nato [“cementing”](#) democracy in Eastern Europe by guaranteeing its independence from Moscow. But remember the mood at the time. It was [triumphalist](#). Not only was capitalism the only economic system left, but its neo-liberal brand was the only brand worth promoting.

For a brief moment, Moscow became an eastern gold rush, a Klondike for venture capitalists, Ikea, Carrefour, Irish pubs, and bible bashers. The Russians, meanwhile, were obsessed with designer labels, not politics.

The Americans in Moscow – at the time – did not bother much about what their hosts thought or did. Russia became irrelevant on the international stage. US advisers boasted about writing the decrees the Russian president Boris Yeltsin issued. And Yeltsin returned the favour by handing over the designs of the latest Russian tank and [the wiring diagram of bugs placed by the KGB](#) in the concrete foundation of an extension being built in the US embassy.

For Russian nationalists, this was nothing less than an act of treason. But doors were open so wide to the West that literally everything that was not nailed down flew through them – [nuclear scientists, missile engineers](#), the cream of the KGB, and suitcases full of cash. Where do you think [the Russians who settled in Highgate](#) in North London, or the Hamptons on Long Island, or Cyprus, or Israel got their money from?

For a time, even the word “West” dropped out of Russian political vocabulary because the new Russians thought they had just joined it.

Ukraine, the West’s victim

The first US ambassador to the newly created Russian Federation, [Robert Strauss](#), spent more time defending what happened in the Kremlin than the White House. Western embassies became spokesmen for a Russia they thought they now owned.

Strauss downplayed the first reports of [the rise of the Russian mafia](#) state, as a mere bagatelle. “This is what Chicago was like in the 20s,” he told me. This was followed by

inane about the green shoots of democracy and the time it took to mow an English lawn. As if he knew.

Bill Clinton and Tony Blair were similarly blasé about what they did in Russia.

The Russian army was “a joke”. When the Russians [sent](#) their armoured columns into Grozny in December 1994, the West thought it could be stopped by small bands of determined Chechens; their pilots had only three hours flying time each month: their frigates sailed in pairs – one to patrol, the second to tow back the first one when it broke down; their submarines sunk.

And so Nato pushed eastwards.

No one at the time bought the argument that all Nato would do was to push the line of confrontation eastwards. Russia’s [pleas to negotiate](#) a security architecture for Eastern Europe fell on deaf ears. They are not falling on deaf ears now, with [90,000 Russian troops](#) massed on Ukraine’s borders.

The victim of this gross act of western stupidity was Ukraine, which for at least the first decade after the fall of the Soviets had survived intact and largely in peace. Civil wars raged all around it, but Ukraine itself maintained its political and social unity despite being comprised of very different communities. With the exception of Western Ukraine, which never forgot that it had been captured by the Bolsheviks from the crumbling Austro-Hungarian empire, Russian and Ukrainian speakers lived in peace.

Now it is divided forever, scared by a civil war from which it will never recover. Ukraine will never regain its lost unity, and for that, Brussels is as much to thank as the bully boys from Moscow.

The new cold war

Then there is China. Pivoting eastwards surely did not mean ending one Cold War and starting a new one with China, but that too is inexorably happening. Biden cannot decide whether to calm President Xi down or confront him, but doing each in sequence will not work.

To get a measure of what mainland China feels when British warships [sail through the Taiwan Strait](#), how would Britain react if Chinese warships appeared in the Irish Sea and sailed between Scotland and Northern Ireland?

The game of “managing” competition has human consequences as devastating as the superpower triumphalism of the 1990s, and those can be observed in Afghanistan today. The Afghanistan of the ousted Afghani president [Ashraf Ghani](#) truly was a Potemkin village, a facade of independent statehood.

An astonishing [300,000 troops and soldiers](#) on its government’s books did not exist. “[Ghost soldiers](#)” were added to official lists so that generals would pocket their wages, Afghanistan’s former finance minister Khalid Payenda [told the BBC](#). The black hole of the former corrupt regime’s finances was an open secret long before Biden set a date for withdrawal.

A report for the US special inspector general for Afghanistan (SIGAR) [warned](#) in 2016:

“Neither the United States nor its Afghan allies know how many Afghan soldiers and police actually exist, how many are in fact available for duty, or, by extension, the true nature of their operational capabilities.”

Now that the tap of US income has been turned off, Afghanistan is [on the verge of a nationwide famine](#). But, incredibly, the US is [blaming](#) this situation on the Taliban. It [withholds money](#) on the grounds of human rights, the night-time revenge killings on former state employees, or the suppression of education for women.

Much of the Afghan central bank’s \$10bn in assets is [parked overseas](#), including \$1.3bn in gold reserves in New York. The US Treasury is using this money as [a lever to pressure](#) the Taliban on women’s rights and the rule of law. It has [granted a licence](#) to the US government and its partners to facilitate humanitarian aid and it gave Western Union permission to resume processing personal remittances from migrants overseas.

But the US does not hold itself to account for having nurtured a state that cannot function without the money that it is now withholding. **The US has direct responsibility for the famine that is now taking place in Afghanistan.** To withhold money from the Taliban because they took power militarily, rather than negotiate their re-entry with other Afghan warlords, also wears somewhat thin.

Same story

The Taliban walked into Kabul with barely a shot fired because everything crumbled before them. The speed of the collapse of Afghan forces blindsided everybody – even Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), who are accused by India and western governments of running the Haqqani network of the Taliban. The only country that really knew what was happening was Iran, because officers of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) were with the Taliban as they walked in, according to Iranian sources close to the IRGC.

Even the ISI were blindsided by the speed of this collapse. An informed source told me in Islamabad: “We had expected the [NDS](#) [National Directorate of Security] to put up a fight in Mazar-i-Sharif, Herat, Kandahar and Kunduz. That would have produced a stalemate and the possibility for negotiation a more inclusive government.”

But we are where we are.

“There were some improvements in the last 20 years. There was a middle class in Kabul, women’s education. But if you want to lose everything, this is the way to do it. The Taliban will go hardline if the place runs out of money. If you want to protect the liberal elements, you have to make Afghanistan stable.”

The Pakistani source listed 10 jihadi groups, as opposed to the one jihadi group, al-Qaeda, that was around in 2001. And the ISI do not know what happened to the arms the Americans left behind.

“We simply don’t know in whose hands they have ended up,” he said. When they pressed the Taliban on forming an inclusive government, the Taliban shot back at them: “Do you have an inclusive government? Do you have a government that includes the PML-N? What do you think it would be like in Pakistan if you had to reconcile groups of fighters who had killed each other’s sons and cousins?”

Starved of funds, there is only one way for the breakaway groups to go – into the hands of the jihadists. He ended his analysis with the following thought: is it really in the US interest to stabilise Afghanistan? If they let the money through, it would mean supporting the very axis of China, Russia and Pakistan that they were now determined to push back. The faltering talks in Vienna, the crisis on Ukraine's border, renewed tension and military posturing in Taiwan, are all part of the same story.

Strategic mistakes

Washington would do well to look at the map of the world and think before it makes its next move. A long period of reflection is needed. Thus far it has obtained the dubious distinction of getting every conflict it has engaged with in this century wrong.

The chance of a global conflict involving real armies and real arms has never been higher and the tripwire to using weapons of mass destruction has never been strung tighter. Nor have all the world's military powers been better armed, able and willing to start their own inventions.

Biden should bear this in mind.

It is now in the US' strategic interest to staunch any more bloodletting in the battlefields it created this century. That means the US should come to a deal with Iran by lifting the sanctions it imposed on Tehran since the 2015 JCPOA. If it wants to balance the growing Chinese and Russian influence in the Middle East, that is the surest way to do it.

Iran is not going to give up its missiles any more than Israel is going to ground its air force. **But a deal in Vienna could be a precursor to regional Gulf security negotiations.** The Emiratis, Qataris, Omanis and Kuwaitis are all ready for it. If Washington wants to apply rules, let it do so first with its allies, who have extraordinary impunity for their brutal actions.

If Washington is the champion of human rights it claims to be, start with Saudi Arabia or Egypt. If it is the enforcer of international law, let's see Washington make Israel pay a price for its continued settlement policy, which makes a mockery of UN Security Council resolutions, and the US' own policy for a resolution to the Palestinian conflict.

The Abraham Accords were devised to establish Israel as America's declared and open regional surrogate. Had Donald Trump secured a second term, such a policy would have been a disaster for US strategic interests in the Middle East. Already Israel thinks it has a veto on US decision making in the region. With this policy fully in place, it would have been in charge of it, which would have meant permanent conflict created by a military power that always strikes first.

Israel acts with ruthless logic. It will use any opportunity to expand its borders until a Palestinian state becomes an impossibility. It probably has already succeeded in that aim. However, this is not US policy. But this expansion continues, almost week in, week out, because no one in Washington will lift a finger to stop it. Doing nothing about armed lynch mobs of settlers attacking unarmed Palestinian villagers in the West Bank is the same as agreeing to them.

If you want to be a champion of rules, apply those rules to yourself first.

This is the only way to regain lost global authority. The US has entered a new era where it

can no longer change regimes by force of arms or sanctions. It has discovered the uselessness of force. It should drop the stick and start handing out bucket loads of carrots. It should get on with the urgent task of deconfliction.

After the damage done this century by conflicts ordered, created and backed by US presidents – Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Libya – that is not only a responsibility but a duty.

Another US strategic mistake would be its, and Western Europe's, last.

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