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Multilateralism and the Biden Administration

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Introduction: Multilateral Restoration

In his first foreign policy speech as president, delivered at the State Department on February 4, 2021, Joe Biden **laid out his vision** of America's engagement with the world. In its conventional combination of the stick of military power and the carrot of diplomacy, Biden's address heralded a return to the foreign policy status quo of the "*a la carte* multilateralism" that has characterized the U.S. global approach since the end of the Cold War.

As Biden explained, U.S. engagement is based, first and foremost, on U.S. global power, "our inexhaustible source of strength" and "abiding advantage." That power has historically consisted of military force, economic pressure, and diplomatic engagement. Rhetorically at least, Biden has favored a recalibration away from a reliance on the military, **insisting** that force will be a "tool of last resort."

In practice, however, Biden has adopted a more ambiguous position toward military power. Reflecting both budgetary concerns and public skepticism of America's recent record of military interventions, the new

president has promised a Global Posture Review of U.S. military footprint overseas, which would likely lead to a redeployment rather than a radical reduction of American military power. Biden's early actions have reflected this cautious approach, ending U.S. support for offensive military operations in the Saudi-led war in Yemen but freezing some of the troops withdrawals his predecessor had instituted at the end of his term. Looking to the future, the president has promised to phase out America's "forever wars" but has also pledged to focus more on pushing back against other great powers, namely Russia and China.

Because the February 4 speech took place in front of an audience of diplomats, Biden not surprisingly focused most of his remarks not on the hard power wielded by the Pentagon but the "smart power" of diplomacy. The president pledged to renew alliance relationships that "atrophied over the past few years of neglect and, I would argue, abuse." At the same time, he stressed the importance of diplomacy even when "engaging our adversaries and our competitors."

In what marked perhaps the most significant break with the foreign policy of his immediate predecessor, Biden promised to restore the United States as full participant, if not a leader, in working multilaterally to solve global problems. He identified those problems as global warming, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, cybersecurity, the refugee crisis, attacks on vulnerable minorities, racial inequality, and the persistence of authoritarianism. Although the president mentioned a few global institutions and agreements, notably the World Health Organization and the Paris Climate Agreement, the emphasis was clearly on the United States reclaiming global leadership rather than leading "from behind," as the Obama administration famously said about its involvement in efforts against former Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi.

In establishing the tone of his administration's foreign policy, Biden didn't enunciate a new doctrine. Rather, in what might be called an approach of "multilateral restoration," he sought to repudiate the inconsistent, unilateral, and anti-global positions of Donald Trump while placing his own administration in the comfortable, pre-Trump foreign policy mainstream that European and Asian allies have come to expect and that is embodied, for instance, in the Franco-German-led [Alliance for Multilateralism](#). Given Biden's role as vice president in the Obama administration and his appointment to high-level positions of many policymakers from that period—Secretary of State Antony Blinken, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, climate czar John Kerry, UN ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield, Indo-Pacific coordinator Kurt Campbell—many observers believe that his

presidency will **represent Obama 2.0**, a resumption of the globally aware, generally predictable, but periodically unorthodox foreign policy of the earlier administration.

The world of 2021, however, is very different from the one that Obama and Biden navigated across their two terms in office. New global problems have emerged such as COVID-19, while others have become more urgent, such as the climate crisis. The four years of Trump's presidency weakened certain traditional elements of statecraft, such as arms control.

Given the persistence of American exceptionalism under Biden, it's difficult not to view his foreign policy approach as MAGA Lite: making America great again with the assistance of foreign partners rather than over their objections. As Steven Blockmans of the Centre for European Policy Studies in Brussels **puts it**, "In all but name, the rallying cry of America First is here to stay," reflected in the Biden administration's prioritization of domestic investments over new trade deals and his expansion of Buy American provisions in federal procurement. Whether represented as America First, MAGA Lite, or even liberal internationalism, the conventional U.S. approach to multilateralism has been instrumental, as a means to the end of preserving U.S. global power.

At the same time, the **inconsistency of U.S. foreign policy** over the years—seesawing back and forth from Clinton's modified multilateralism to Bush's aggressive unilateralism to Obama's cautious multilateralism to Trump's anti-globalist posturing—has led both allies and adversaries alike to hedge their bets by investing their political capital either in other alliances or in more self-reliant economic and security strategies. The most dramatic examples of this hedging have been China's establishment of rival multilateral economic institutions and the European Union's investment into autonomous military structures.

The Biden administration's rapid use of executive orders to reverse Trump's positions—for instance, bringing the United States back into the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Paris climate accords—has been welcomed in many of the world's capitals. But it also confirms what many in the international policymaking community have long viewed as America's overly volatile foreign policy. The new administration's reversals of Trump policies extend to immigration, as Biden has cancelled the "Muslim travel ban" and ended funding for the largely unbuilt wall on the border with Mexico. He quickly hit rewind on the environmental deregulations of the Trump administration and the previous president's approval of the Keystone XL pipeline. In addition, the Biden team has taken steps to

reenter the Iran nuclear deal, has revived arms control negotiations with Russia, and plans at least to mitigate the impact of the trade sanctions against China. But if Trump could reverse Obama's positions on all these matters, and Biden with a stroke of the pen could do the same to Trump's reversals, who's to say that the next president in 2024 will not perform the same U-turns?

Indeed, as it looks to engage more deeply on these issues, the Biden administration faces a number of obstacles to realizing even its modest multilateral restoration: congressional opposition, corporate lobbying, public indifference or hostility, the mistrust of allies, and bureaucratic inertia. It also must deal with a set of interlocking crises on the home front, from the pandemic and the resulting contraction of the U.S. economy to crumbling infrastructure, endemic racial inequality, political polarization, and rising poverty rates. Finally, the administration must reckon with challenges within the multilateral project itself, including a democratic deficit and the problem of non-compliance.

But on certain key issues, such as global health and environmentalism, progressives will have an opportunity to push U.S. policy in the direction of greater equitable international engagement during the Biden years. On a case-by-case basis rather than through a transformative agenda, then, the Biden administration might alter—or be pushed to alter—the way the United States engages the world.

The Trajectory of American Global Engagement

The United States helped to build the existing multilateral order. It played a key role in establishing the United Nations and drafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It was a prime mover behind the creation of the Bretton Woods institutions (IMF, World Bank) and in making the U.S. dollar the effective world currency. During the Cold War, it created regional multilateral institutions such as NATO and its short-lived Asian cousin SEATO. American expertise was critical even in the development of agreements—like the International Law of the Seas and the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court—that the U.S. Senate has yet to ratify.

The ambivalent relationship that the United States has maintained with multilateral institutions reflects a deep division within the American elite over the extent to which the country should accede to the rules of the international order, even if those rules are written in large part by the

United States. This tension could be seen in the refusal of Congress to back Woodrow Wilson's attempt to bring the United States into the League of Nations all the way to a similar congressional resistance to the Rome Statute and Donald Trump's withdrawal of the United States from the Paris Climate Accord over the objections of some even within his own administration.

This ambivalence prevented the United States, at the end of the Cold War, from taking advantage of an extraordinary opportunity to rewrite the rules of a global order born in the wake of World War II and shaped by the bipolar confrontation of Washington and Moscow. Instead of negotiating new rules, however, the United States pursued a strategy of inclusion into existing structures: inviting the countries of East-Central Europe into NATO, bringing China (and others) into the World Trade Organization, and facilitating entry into the UN for countries like the two Koreas, former Soviet and Yugoslav republics, and new states like Timor-Leste. By contrast, the United States chose not to collaborate in replacing NATO with a larger multilateral security system from the Atlantic to the Urals, restructuring the WTO or any of the international financial organizations, or transforming the UN Security Council to reflect modern geopolitical realities.

On this last point, although *An Agenda for Peace* (1992) and *An Agenda for Development* (1994) led to some changes in the UN structure and new bodies have been created like the Human Rights Council (2006) and the Green Climate Fund (2010), the Security Council has remained intact in terms of permanent members (still the original P5) and non-permanent members (stuck at 10 for more than half a century). The Clinton administration supported the inclusion of Germany and Japan in the Security Council, and Obama sort of backed India's bid for a permanent seat, but nothing came of this, largely because of the expected vetoes of other P5 members.

As David Bosco explains, the United States has not had much of an incentive to back any major changes in the Security Council: "On many issues, it can use the council to help share burdens, amplify its voice, and endow policies it favors with the force of international law. When Washington doesn't find the council convenient, the veto power means it can work around the body without risking an official reprimand." As senator and then vice president, Joe Biden has long paid attention to UN issues, but his focus has been on peacekeeping. Give that a Senate vote is necessary to ratify any amendment to the UN charter, Biden is not likely to expend his limited political capital on any major UN initiatives beyond restoring U.S. funding for UN operations.

In the economic realm, the United States did indeed support changes in multilateral institutions, but these changes were about policies not structure. The World Bank, for instance, was focused on infrastructure development and, later, poverty alleviation. The IMF imposed certain austerity measures, such deficit reduction, but **these were short-term** and “the Fund retained a neutral stance about the relative role of states and markets in national economies.” Beginning in the 1980s, by using its disproportionate influence in both the World Bank (15.85 percent of the weighed votes) and IMF (16.52 percent), the United States pushed both institutions toward a laissez-faire, pro-deregulation orientation through the application of longer-term “conditionalities” to loans that required receiving governments to change national policies to remain eligible. Privatization of state properties, reduction of government services, and the weakening of the regulatory apparatus became part of the “structural adjustment” packages imposed on recipient countries.

This emerging “Washington consensus” facilitated economic globalization through the reduction of barriers to trade and facilitated greater access to markets, particularly in the Global South, for transnational corporations. Although the United States was an enthusiastic booster of these changes, it also suffered economically from the greater global fluidity of capital, whether measured in terms of deindustrialization, wage stagnation, or greater income polarization.

Instead of translating the unipolar moment of the early 1990s into a new kind of multilateralism, then, the United States sought to preserve its economic and military dominance through existing global structures. In practice, this approach can be described as “*a la carte multilateralism*,” a commitment to “multilateralism when we can but unilateralism when we must.” This philosophy can be traced through Bill Clinton’s policies toward former Yugoslavia, George Bush’s handling of the Iraq War, Barack Obama’s incorporation of drone strikes in the “war on terrorism,” and Donald Trump’s trade policies with both allies and adversaries. This *a la carte* multilateralism positions the United States about halfway along a policy spectrum with aggressive American exceptionalism at one end and an equitable internationalism at the other.

The American public is similarly conflicted on these issues. According to Pew polling, Americans **line up in predictably partisan ways** on multilateralism, with Republicans generally less enthusiastic about active U.S. global engagement and Democrats more enthusiastic. But these positions have changed over time. The partisan gap, at least in terms of support for the United Nations, **was only 7 percent in 1994**. It has grown to 46 percent

in 2020, with 85 percent of Democrats positive about the UN compared to only 39 percent of Republicans. There is also a certain perversity to American attitudes. Democratic enthusiasm for global engagement was quite low during most of the Obama years and only began to rise in his last two years in office. Republican enthusiasm, meanwhile, was rather high during the Bush years and only began to fall precipitously when Obama took office. In 2019, after more than two years of Trump, the enthusiasm levels of both Republicans and Democrats **rose significantly**. On this central issue of multilateralism, the American public tends to mirror in reverse the policy approach of the administration, which does not bode well for those hoping for a groundswell of popular support for progressive multilateralism under Biden.

In response to this intermittent commitment to multilateralism and, as importantly, the often-wild swings in policy from one administration to another, the rest of the world has taken steps to establish multilateral institutions that are independent of U.S. control. In the security realm, U.S. allies have built up their own military capacities. The European Union has invested in the “strategic autonomy” of its European Defense Fund **to the tune of 8 billion euro** in the most recent EU budget. South Korea has not only significantly **increased its military spending** but now **produces** many of its own major weapons systems. As it gradually breaks out of its “peace constitution,” Japan has been assuming more and more of the alliance responsibilities once handled by the United States even to the point of planning to **take over** the new military base at Henoko on Okinawa. The Philippines, despite an ongoing conflict with China in the South China Sea, has paradoxically **explored closer security ties** with Beijing. In perhaps the most extreme example, Israel long ago opted for its own nuclear weapons instead of sheltering under a U.S. nuclear umbrella.

In the economic realm, meanwhile, the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) orchestrated an end run around the U.S. dominance over international financial institutions when they established the New Development Bank, headquartered in Shanghai. The bank, the first run by emerging markets, focuses on the same kind of infrastructure development as the World Bank (dams, ports, power plants) but also has a commitment to sustainability, issuing its **first green financial bond** in 2016. In five years, it has put together a \$21 billion portfolio of lending to its member states and **plans to expand** its membership to more countries in the developing world.

China has also **established** its own multilateral lending alternative to the World Bank: the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. Headquartered

in Beijing but with members from all around the world, the AIIB was intimately connected to China's One Belt One Road project of building up infrastructure not only around China's periphery but also further afield. In 2020, the AIIB devoted \$13 billion to COVID-19 response and is also pivoting more resolutely in the direction of sustainability, pledging to commit half its approved financing by 2025 to climate investments. Although European countries are members of the AIIB, the United States has pointedly refused to join.

As these examples suggest, the United States faces a much more complex multilateral order that is no longer entirely dependent on policy decisions made in Washington. The *de facto* policy of *a la carte* multilateralism has created a world order in which the United States is no longer in control of the menu. The Biden administration is thus operating in a different context than what the Obama administration faced. When it comes to multilateralism, the Biden team couldn't establish Obama 2.0 even if it wanted to do so. The spread of COVID-19 in 2020 and the sharpening of the climate crisis have only confirmed this reality.

The Pandemic

In the wake of the SARS epidemic in 2003, the World Health Organization (WHO) presided over a global effort to establish new guidelines for responding to future outbreaks. These regulations were legally binding, and 196 countries signed the framework agreement. But ten years later, fewer than 20 percent of the signatories had implemented the core requirements.

When COVID-19 hit in 2020, what remained of this international cooperation unraveled. Dozens of countries, as Selam Gebrekidan reported in *The New York Times* in March 2020, "are flouting the international regulations and snubbing their obligations. Some have failed to report outbreaks to the organization, as required. Others have instituted international travel restrictions, against the advice of the WHO, and without notifying global health officials." As the pandemic intensified that spring, an every-nation-for-itself ethos prevailed as countries shut down their borders, imposed export restrictions on personal protection equipment and some foodstuffs, and particularly in the case of the United States and China, traded accusations of responsibility for the pandemic.

At the technical level, however, a spirit of cooperation continued, with the genetic sequence of the COVID virus shared globally, scientists engaging in unprecedented cooperation on vaccine research, and doctors teaming

up across borders to devise better treatments. Other signs of solidarity emerged, as some countries shared medical supplies and expertise, for instance the million masks and 20,000 protective suits that France provided Italy, the nearly 7 million masks that Taiwan donated to European countries, and the Cuban medics who provided assistance in nearly 40 countries. The bailout package that the European Union ultimately put together shifted a disproportionate amount of funding, much of it in the form of grants rather than loans, to its most heavily indebted members like Italy.

The U.S. government, under Trump, was not interested in cooperation. It seemed to relish the opportunity presented by the pandemic to implement key elements of its anti-internationalist agenda. It pulled the United States out of the WHO, closed borders, and reduced immigration to even lower levels. Its indifference to the plight of other countries during the pandemic mirrored its overall lack of regard for global health.

The Biden administration has taken a different approach to the pandemic and global health more generally. In addition to reengaging with the WHO, it rescinded the Mexico City policy that restricted U.S. funding for organizations that engaged in family planning and restored U.S. support for the UN Population Fund. It's unclear however whether Biden's previous support for global health initiatives in the past, like PEPFAR, will translate into greater funding for and engagement in multilateral health programs.

On COVID-19 more specifically, the new administration moved quickly to join the COVID-19 Vaccine Global Access (COVAX) Facility, designed to ensure equitable distribution of the vaccine to the global south, and has followed through on delivering the congressional allocation of \$4 billion for the program. It also pledged to seek congressional funding for other multilateral initiatives such as the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations.

But there are limits to the Biden administration's global solidarity. Although the new president also promised to donate surplus vaccines, he has said that he won't do so while ramping up the vaccination program in the United States. The administration has rejected the European proposal, spearheaded by France, to immediately provide African countries with 5 percent of the vaccine stockpiles of the richest countries. COVAX, meanwhile, currently has nothing close to what it needs to meet even its limited goal of vaccinating 20 percent of the populations of participating member-states in the global south by the end of 2021. As of early February, it expects to cover about 3 percent of its target group by the middle of this year.

Ultimately, the success of COVAX will come down to funding. Only half of the U.S. package of \$4 billion will be delivered this year. The administration has proposed \$11 billion in funding through its **American Rescue Plan** to support “the international health and humanitarian response; mitigate the pandemic’s devastating impact on global health, food security, and gender-based violence; support international efforts to develop and distribute medical countermeasures for COVID-19; and build the capacity required to fight COVID-19, its variants, and emerging biological threats.” But such support will require congressional approval.

Beyond additional funding and providing surplus vaccines, the Biden administration could help strengthen the global response to the pandemic by **supporting** a WTO waiver of intellectual property to speed vaccine distribution throughout the world, which the **People’s Vaccine movement** has demanded. Biden has also promised to create a Global Health Emergency Board to coordinate an international policy response to the pandemic. A first step perhaps would be to **convene the Global Health Security Agenda**, established in 2014 under U.S. leadership, to pool global experiences of the COVID crisis and draw lessons that a Global Health Emergency Board could then implement. Part of this process should be an assessment of what went wrong with the WHO effort to draw up common rules after the SARS epidemic.

Vaccine nationalism has been the greatest challenge to an equitable multilateral response to the pandemic. The richest countries have locked up more than half of the supply of the vaccine, with the United States securing enough purchase options to inoculate its population **almost five times over**. This is a residue of MAGA that the Biden administration has not tried to reverse. The global disparities in vaccine distribution will inevitably translate into greater economic disparities, as the economies of richer countries will be able to recover more quickly.

Similar disparities can already be seen in the multilateral response to the climate crisis.

Addressing the Climate Crisis

The culmination of the Obama administration’s approach to the climate crisis was the agreement coming out of the Paris climate talks at the end of 2015. Largely because of John Kerry’s insistence, the commitments made as part of the Paris deal were voluntary—because the secretary of state **anticipated** that the Senate would not ratify a treaty with binding

commitments. The Paris agreement was successful in getting virtually every country on board (with the notable exceptions of non-ratifiers Iran, Turkey, and Iraq). But it hasn't been successful in meeting the stated goal of preventing the average global temperature from rising at a pace that will exceed 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels by 2100.

Kerry back as climate envoy and elevated the new position to Cabinet-level. Biden has followed through on his promise to rejoin the Paris accord and pledged to put the United States on track to be carbon-neutral by 2050. With executive orders, Biden has also reversed a number of Trump's business-friendly environmental decrees and has publicized its "clean energy revolution" to reorient the U.S. economy toward sustainability and environmental justice.

At the international level, justice is the sticking point. The challenge within the multilateral frameworks has been to reconcile two often contradictory imperatives: economic development and environmental sustainability. This in turn boils down to a question of money: how much will the richer countries ante up to usher poorer countries into a clean energy future. Kerry has spoken to this issue of climate inequality. "The World Economic Forum—the CEO capacity of the Forum—is really going to have to play a front and center role in refining the Great Reset to deal with climate change and inequity—all of which is being laid bare as a consequence of COVID-19," he said at a World Economic Forum event in June 2020.

A major test for the new administration will be to put its money where its mouth is, and one example of that would be its contributions to the Green Climate Fund. Established in 2010 under the auspices of the UN, the Fund raised about \$7 billion out of the \$10 billion initially pledged. A major reason for the shortfall was the United States, which promised \$3 billion but delivered only \$1 billion. At the end of 2019, the Fund put out another call to replenish its coffers and received pledges of another \$9.8 billion.

Kerry has already announced that the United States will make good on its previous commitment by sending \$2 billion to the Fund. But he has not made mention of U.S. support for the additional replenishment of the Fund. Climate campaigners have called on the administration to double its original commitment, as a number of European countries plus South Korea and New Zealand have done, and top up its contributions to \$9 billion total. Such a firm action by the United States might not only persuade other countries to achieve this higher standard but also pressure outliers like Russia and Australia to join the effort in the first place.

Biden is also planning to hold a Global Climate Summit on Earth Day (April 22, 2021), though it's unclear how such a meeting would differ from the one held in December 2020 to mark the fifth anniversary of the Paris agreement. Climate campaigners **are urging** the administration to use this opportunity to focus on “super pollutants” such as methane, black carbon, and HFCs, which contribute disproportionately to global warming.

In the meantime, preparations for COP26 are beginning for November in Glasgow. The hostility of the Trump administration and the divided attention span of the Biden team—not to mention the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic—may compromise the efficacy of the UN meeting. The Paris agreement came together because of **18 months of intensive preliminary negotiations**. A similar effort to forge a pre-meeting consensus for COP26 has been slow to emerge.

The Biden administration has made commitments on other environmental issues. It has endorsed a “30 by 30” initiative: protecting 30 percent of U.S. lands and coastal areas by 2030. This effort would require **setting aside 440 million more acres** of land for conservation. The pledge, part of a global campaign to preserve biodiversity, would require a significant scaling back of extraction industries on federal lands.

Given the opposition of Republicans in the Senate, it's not likely that the Biden administration could push through the much belated ratification of the UN Convention on the Law of the Seas. But there is something useful that the Biden administration could do through the UN's International Maritime Organization: force international shipping to **abide by an emissions target**, beginning with ships that enter U.S. waters.

Cooperation between the United States and China is critical for any global environmental efforts to move forward. China is currently the leading emitter of carbon in the world, with **nearly twice the annual rate** of the United States at number two (though the United States **still leads** in terms of cumulative output over time and per-capita carbon footprint). During the Obama years, the two countries created the Clean Energy Research Consortium (CERC), a public-private initiative that spurs research and development in several energy-related sectors. Renewing CERC would be a first step in boosting U.S.-China cooperation.

The Economic Order

The World Economic Forum's much-heralded Great Reset 2021 came and went without much of a stir, aside from some scattered **commentary in**

the conservative press about how the “globalists” were bent on tampering with the free market. Speeches at the virtual gathering held at the end of January 2021 by Greta Thunberg, Angela Merkel, Sadiq Khan, Vladimir Putin, and Oxfam’s Gabriela Bucher attracted very little media attention in the United States. The overwhelmingly national focus of countries on their own pandemic-related economic problems, coupled with the lack of photo opportunities for paparazzi, no doubt contributed to the media’s indifference.

In one of the few commentaries about the meeting, the *Washington Post’s* Ishaan Tharoor (who also participated in the event) concluded his column by quoting Darren Walker, the president of the Ford Foundation, who “argued that ‘if capitalism is to be sustained, we must intentionally put the nail in the coffin’ of the neoliberal orthodoxy championed by the late American economist Milton Friedman.” It is a sentiment that the Davos crowd had been leading up to pre-pandemic, with their belated acknowledgement that globalization wasn’t benefiting everyone and that worsening inequality was calling into question some of the fundamental assumptions of the global economy. But this sentiment has yet to be reflected in the core activities or the structures of global economic institutions.

Biden skipped the event, so it was up to participants like Bill Gates to represent the United States at Davos. In statements prior to the event, the administration largely focused on the importance of incorporating sustainability into the World Economic Forum approach. The indifference Biden has shown to Davos reflects not only a calculated refusal to be associated with “globalists” but also a preference to focus on rebooting the U.S. economy through the administration’s initial \$1.9 trillion stimulus package, the aforementioned American Rescue Plan. The global economy, after all, has proven to be a divisive issue in the United States whether in the form of controversial trade pacts, Trump-imposed tariffs that have hit farmers and manufacturers hard, or the rules on investment that have helped to hollow out the U.S. industrial sector.

The pandemic has had a devastating impact on the global economy. The World Bank estimates that, in 2020, the global economy contracted by 4.3 percent. In comparison, during the financial crisis in 2009, the global economy shrank by only .1 percent. In response to the economic crisis, countries have engaged in substantial deficit spending to cushion the impact of the pandemic with additional social benefits, loans to small and large businesses, and targeted assistance to the health sector. Globally, the price tag for the bailouts has exceeded \$20 trillion. By the end of 2020, according to *The Washington Post*, “total government debt worldwide was projected

to soar by \$9 trillion and top 103 percent of global GDP, according to the Institute of International Finance—a historic jump of more than 10 percentage points in just one year.”

For the first time since 1946, the United States registered a level of debt greater than its GDP in 2020 and is expected to do so again in 2021. But what the United States and other major economies can accommodate as deficit spending has plunged other countries into more immediate peril. A number of countries—Zambia, Costa Rica, Sri Lanka, Brazil—have either defaulted on their loans or are close to it. Meanwhile, the fiscal crisis of poorer countries has pushed several to consider abandoning climate- and environment-friendly restrictions on such harmful sectors as industrial mining in order to make financial ends meet.

In May 2020, the international financial institutions and the G20 backed a suspension of debt repayment for the world’s poorest nations. But such a moratorium only pushes the problem down the road, and even the G20 recognized at its November meeting that this kind of debt relief is insufficient. IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva has supported the provision of more Special Drawing Rights (SDR) to the worst-off countries, but the Trump administration opposed this option. Both houses of Congress are considering a bill that would mandate the issuance of additional SDRs, but Biden’s pick for the head of the Treasury Department, Janet Yellen, has been unexpectedly skeptical of a move that former treasury chief Lawrence Summers calls a “no-brainer.”

But even the issuance of SDRs doesn’t address the crushing debt burden that so many countries face. Before the pandemic hit, 44 percent of least developed and other low-income developing countries were “at high risk or in debt distress,” according to the UN’s Financing for Sustainable Development Report 2020. That number had doubled in a mere five years. Moreover, the outflow of capital in the form of debt repayment has been substantial. In 2012, the last year for which such data was available, developing countries paid out \$2 trillion more in debt service than they received in all aid, investment, and income from abroad.

It’s unclear where Biden stands on debt relief or cancellation. But the president’s January 27 executive order on “tackling the climate crisis” includes the following provision: “develop a strategy for how the voice and vote of the United States can be used in international financial institutions, including the World Bank Group and the International Monetary Fund, to promote financing programs, economic stimulus packages, and debt relief initiatives that are aligned with and support the goals of the Paris

Agreement.” It’s possible that the administration will, instead of debt cancellation, promote some form of **debt-for-nature** or **debt-for-climate** swaps, preferably in versions that include a greater range of stakeholders including indigenous groups, or perhaps back the **issuance of bonds** linked to performance on green indicators.

Given how controversial trade policy has been within U.S. politics—not to mention among the European and Asian countries that were the targets of Trump’s tariffs—Biden has **moved more slowly** on this issue than on other multilateral questions like health or the environment. One immediate step, however, was to remove the U.S. block that Trump had put on the candidacy of former free-trade-oriented Nigerian finance minister Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala for the head of the World Trade Organization. She began work on March 1.

“Unlike Trump, Biden describes most foreign nations as potential partners, not adversaries bent on unfairly competing for commercial spoils,” **writes** David Lynch in *The Washington Post*. “The Democrat is likely to substitute industrial policy for tariffs, seeking to revive domestic factories with a \$400 billion ‘Buy America’ initiative and \$300 billion in clean energy research.” Biden’s appointments to key trade positions suggest, moreover, that he will be **putting labor and environmental concerns** at the center of U.S. policy. As a presidential candidate, Biden urged making future trade deals contingent on countries meeting their commitments under the Paris agreement, and members of Congress **are already pushing** the new president to change the U.S.-Canada-Mexico trade deal to reflect this condition. Another potential trade policy option is a fossil fuel export ban, for which Biden has **expressed some support**.

Biden has emphasized that the United States **should resume** its previous role of taking the lead in crafting the global trade order. One place where that might start would be the investor-state dispute settlement provisions in trade treaties that provide transnational corporations with the power to bring countries to court over regulations that affect their bottom line. In response to the United Steelworkers, Biden **wrote** back in 2020: “I don’t believe that corporations should get special tribunals that are not available to other organizations. I oppose the ability of private corporations to attack labor, health, and environmental policies through the investor-state dispute settlement (ISDS) process, and I oppose the inclusion of such provisions in future trade agreements.”

The Biden administration could go beyond the removal of ISDS provisions to play a more assertive role in establishing more equitable rules for the

global economy. It could back, for instance, a **Global Social Protection Fund** that would help countries establish a basic social income for children, the disabled, and older individuals as well as providing essential health care to the population. It could support a binding **treaty on transnational corporations** that would require multinational businesses to adhere to international norms and regulations involving human rights. And it could engage with the global effort to create **an international UN tax commission** to tackle, among other issues, global tax dodgers and unregulated tax havens.

Multilateral Security

During his long years in Congress, Joe Biden prided himself on his commitment to arms control. So, it was no surprise that in one of his first foreign policy decisions he extended New START, the last nuclear arms control treaty in effect between Russia and the United States.

The rest of the arms control and disarmament agenda will be considerably harder to advance. New START merely establishes ceilings on nuclear warheads for both sides and addresses only strategic, not tactical, nukes. So, as Stephen Pifer **argues**, a follow-on treaty could establish a ceiling on all nuclear warheads, for instance at 2,500, which would cover battlefield nuclear weapons and result in at least **a 50 percent cut** in the arsenals of the two sides. Another option for bilateral negotiations with Russia would be to focus on limitations to missile defense or, at the very least, cooperation to protect against third-party missile attacks. A third option would be to focus on conventional weaponry and constraints on weapons sales.

The Biden administration could move more quickly with an announcement of a policy of no-first-use of nuclear weapons, something the new president has **supported in the past**, and agreeing with Moscow to de-alert ICBMs much as Reagan and Gorbachev **de-alerted another leg** of the nuclear triad, strategic bombers, back in 1991. Some analysts—like the organization **Global Zero** and former U.S. defense secretary **William Perry**—have proposed eliminating ICBMs altogether.

On the non-proliferation front, Biden inherits the ruins of an Obama-era agreement with Iran and the perpetually stalled negotiations with North Korea over its nuclear weapons program. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran is a true multilateral effort involving Russia, China, and various European partners. The Trump administration did everything within its powers to sabotage not only the JCPOA but any attempts to engage Iran. Although both the Iranian government and the Biden

administration have indicated a desire to resurrect the JCPOA, it's not so easily done. Iran has steadily increased its supply of enriched uranium and has also **demanded compensation** for the additional sanctions that the Trump administration imposed on the country. The problem boils down to one of sequence: will Iran first come back into compliance with the JCPOA or will the United States lift sanctions and provide compensation? In an attempt to break out of this impasse, the Biden administration on February 18 **rescinded** Trump's last round of sanctions on Iran and promised to join with Europe in an effort to rescue the JCPOA.

Although nuclear talks with North Korea have been multilateral in the past—the Six Party Talks of the George W. Bush years—the more recent attempts have been bilateral, both under the Obama administration and, most notably, by Donald Trump himself in his three meetings with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. Biden is bringing on board some of the most knowledgeable diplomats about North Korea: Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific affairs Sung Kim, Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman, and Kurt Campbell as the Indo-Pacific coordinator at the National Security Council. But the perennial challenge will be to find a formula that trades sanction relief for denuclearization and meets the demands of both sides. In general, North Korea prefers bilateral discussions with the United States, but any successful negotiation will require coordination with both South Korea and Japan on the one hand and China on the other. Bringing a formal end to the Korean War, which Pyongyang has supported, would require similar coordination.

One **possible new twist** that could appeal to both North Korea and the Biden administration would be to offer clean energy alternatives as an incentive for North Korea to denuclearize. This shift in approach, which builds on North Korea's already small carbon footprint, would in effect substitute solar panels and the like for the "peaceful use of nuclear energy" offered in the Non-Proliferation Treaty and the 1994 Agreed Framework deal.

While the United States has emphasized the nuclear side of non-proliferation, it has done considerably less to restrain the flow of conventional weapons. Beyond some human rights restrictions on arms exports that Congress has imposed—the Leahy Law and some **proposed follow-ups**—the U.S. government has balked at any measures that might cut into the very lucrative trade in weapons systems that has made America the top exporter by a large margin. Even the Arms Trade Treaty, which focuses on transparency not control, has encountered resistance from the Senate, which never ratified the agreement, and prompted the Trump administration to unsign it in 2019.

Biden did move quickly to freeze arms sales to Saudi Arabia and UAE, and other deals might be on the chopping block. But particularly if the administration ends up reducing the military budget, it might well follow the **Obama strategy** of making it easier for military contractors to export the weapons that the Pentagon is no longer buying. On the other hand, as analyst Rachel Stohl **has suggested**, the administration could be pressured into some modest reforms like strengthening oversight of potential arms sales, bringing back the control of firearms sales from the Commerce Department back to the State Department, restoring a “presumption of denial” in sales of long-range armed drones, and putting an end to the waivers of restrictions that would otherwise prevent arms sales to countries in violation of the Child Soldiers Prevention Act.

When it comes to other issues of war and peace, the Biden administration hasn’t indicated any major shift in U.S. approaches to traditional national security concerns. The new president hasn’t announced any new multilateral peace plans, other than revealing a preference for ending the “forever wars” in order to focus on great power confrontations with Russia and China.

As the Obama administration discovered, shifting the U.S. military away from the Middle East is not easy. Biden inherits partnerships with Israel and Egypt, a waning security commitment to the governments in Iraq and Afghanistan, a small force in Syria **to deal with the Islamic State**, a troubled relationship with Turkey, ties with the Gulf states disrupted by the war in Yemen and human rights considerations, and finally a fluctuating commitment to Palestinian self-determination. The Trump administration attempted to tilt U.S. multilateral peacemaking in the region in favor of the Israelis and Saudis, with the consequent Abraham Accords establishing new diplomatic relations between Israel and several majority Muslim states. A Biden recalibration, **signaled** by the restoration of U.S. aid to the UN Relief and Works Agency and the reestablishment of diplomatic relations with Palestinian authorities that had lapsed under Trump, will restore a measure of balance.

The administration has not yet indicated any new initiatives in resolving the conflicts in Afghanistan or Syria. The suspension of assistance to the Saudi-led war in Yemen, however, marked the beginning of what promises to be **a new and potentially multilateral effort** to end that conflict. Biden has already appointed Timothy Lenderking, a seasoned, Arabic-speaking diplomat, as special envoy, and removed the terror designation from the Houthis. “The United States has had a major hand in Yemen from the

beginning and thus must answer for its part in the tragedy,” Robert Malley and Stephen Pomper **wrote** recently in *Foreign Affairs*. This acknowledgement has additional weight since Malley is the Biden administration’s new special envoy for Iran.

A refocus on great power competition, meanwhile, might change the dynamics around the ongoing conflicts in Ukraine and the South China Sea in particular. In Ukraine, the United States has largely left it to France and Germany to negotiate the dispute between Moscow and Kiev over the separatist Donbas region. But Biden knows Ukraine quite well, so it’s **quite possible** that he’ll appoint a special envoy to the Minsk process to push for a more stable resolution. In the meantime, he’ll likely strengthen Ukraine’s hand by **upping U.S. assistance**, including military assets.

In the South China Sea, the Biden administration has already rejected China’s claims to most of the disputed waters and backed the position of the Philippines, which received a positive verdict from the arbitral tribunal of the UN Convention on the Law of the Seas. But Biden has also pledged to look for ways that Washington and Beijing can cooperate. “A small step forward would be for the US and China to reaffirm their crisis management mechanisms so that neither side is surprised to the point that an unintended clash occurs,” **suggests** maritime expert Mark Valencia. “Several communication mechanisms already exist and reinvigorating them would seem a logical step.”

Great power tensions are likely to continue to take place within the United Nations. As Linda Thomas-Greenfield, Biden’s nominee for UN ambassador, said in her confirmation hearings, “We know China is working across the U.N. system to drive an authoritarian agenda that stands in opposition to the founding values of the institution—American values. Their success depends on our continued withdrawal. That will not happen on my watch.” These confrontations, however, may take the form more of jockeying for position rather than outright conflict. For instance, the Biden administration is likely to restore U.S. funding for UN peacekeeping operations that Trump cut. That will be as much a sign of Biden’s historic commitment to peacekeeping as a bid to challenge China’s efforts **to expand its influence** over these operations.

On the air war part of the “war on terror,” Biden has offered both continuity and change. The administration launched two air strikes, one against Iranian targets in Syria on February 25 and the other in Iraq on February 9 against the Islamic State. The Syrian attack in particular has prompted **a bipartisan effort in Congress** to repeal the Authorizations for the Use of

Military Force passed in 1991 and 2002 in order to narrow the presidential ability to launch future air strikes. At the same time, however, the administration has yet to report **any drone strikes**. This is in marked contrast to the strikes that Obama and Trump ordered almost immediately upon taking office as well as the escalation in attacks that took place in Trump's final months. In one of its first orders, the administration **issued a temporary halt** to any drone strikes outside of combat areas such as Afghanistan and Syria. In addition to initiating a review of **drone strikes**, the administration has launched a probe into **Special Forces operations** to ascertain whether they have adhered to the Pentagon's "law of war" requirements.

Democracy and Human Rights

Another area of "multilateralism restoration" for the Biden administration is a renewed focus on human rights and democracy promotion. Trump was notoriously uninterested in human rights and international law, and he seemed to be more comfortable negotiating with dictators than with democratic allies. Biden, on the other hand, has promised to hold undemocratic regimes accountable, particularly those like Egypt that receive U.S. assistance. He has also promised to convene a Global Summit of Democracies, which may end up addressing some of the challenges to democracy within the United States as well.

One of the first acts of the administration was to reengage the UN Human Rights Council as a nonvoting observer, nearly three years after Trump withdrew the United States from the body. Full membership **will depend** on elections next year when three seats become available after the expiration of the terms for Austria, Denmark, and Italy. The new administration continues to chide the Council for its focus on Israel, the putative reason for Trump's withdrawal, as well the presence of rights-abusing countries among the members. To bolster its credibility in the lead-up to Council elections, Kenneth Roth of Human Rights Watch **cautions**, the administration should be careful to make its own independent criticisms of Israeli violations of international law and human rights conventions in its treatment of Palestinians and the occupied territories. A more substantive approach would involve applying human rights conditionalities to U.S. military aid to Israel.

An early test for the administration has been the military coup in Myanmar, which took place at the beginning of February. In addition to condemning the coup, the administration imposed sanctions on generals involved in the action that **block their access** to \$1 billion in funds parked

in U.S. banks. The crisis in Myanmar could represent an opportunity to coordinate policy **multilaterally with ASEAN**. But it will also highlight the divergent approaches of Beijing and Washington. China has already begun to accede to the new military rule, but it might be open to cooperation with the Biden administration on this issue, given that both countries have cultivated good relations in the past with opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi. And, in the meantime, the Biden administration has highlighted human rights in **its initial contacts** with China, with the president warning of unspecified “repercussions” for Beijing’s internment of Uyghurs in Xinjiang and other policies.

Another country that Biden has singled out for attention is Belarus, where hundreds of thousands of protesters have demanded that “**Europe’s last dictator**” Alexander Lukashenko step down. Biden has **called for expanding sanctions** against Belarussian officials. Human rights will also play a role in the “**recalibration**” of U.S. relations with Saudi Arabia, bringing U.S. policy more in alignment with that of the European Union, particularly around imposing limits on military sales. “We, of course, expect Saudi Arabia to improve its record on human rights,” White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki has **said**. “That includes releasing political prisoners such as women’s rights advocates from Saudi jails.” Shortly after this press conference, Saudi Arabia released prominent women’s rights advocate Loujain al-Hathloul. Meanwhile, Congress **is pushing** the administration to put more pressure on Turkey for its human rights violations at home and in nearby states such as Syria, Iraq, and Libya.

A key element of reversing the Trump agenda is again bringing U.S. conduct in compliance with international law. The Trump administration, for instance, **violated international regulations** on asylum-seekers and refugees by returning migrants to unsafe countries, separating families, and blocking asylum-seekers from applying for safe haven. The previous administration had not only placed an annual cap of 15,000 on refugees, the lowest in 40 years, but had created a **dizzying array of bureaucratic impediments** to ensure that only a fraction of that number would ever make it to the United States. Biden has **promised** to increase the cap to 125,000, which exceeds even the level from the last year of the Obama administration. The administration has also begun to dismantle the “Remain in Mexico” program that Trump instituted by **slowly letting in 25,000 asylum-seekers** beginning in mid-February, with **some petitioners in extreme circumstances** allowed entry even earlier. As part of a reboot of immigration policy, the administration has also **cancelled agreements** with Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador that forced those seeking asylum in the United States to first seek asylum in these “safe third countries.”

Another violation of international law has been the **prolonged and indefinite detention** without trial of suspected terrorists in Guantanamo Bay. The Obama administration had tried to close the U.S. military prison at this facility in Cuba only to face determined political opposition from members of Congress. Nevertheless, the administration was able to **reduce the number** from 245 to 41. Today, 40 internees remain. Biden, too, has **vowed** to close the facility, this time by 2024. Republican lawmakers are sure to continue to put up a fight, though ultimately they might be persuaded by fiscal rather than legal arguments: each prisoner costs the U.S. government **\$13 million per year**. In mid-February, the Biden administration **also signed on** to a non-binding Declaration Against Arbitrary Detention in State-to-State Relations along with 57 other countries, another sign of greater engagement with multilateral human rights initiatives that only further highlights the Guantanamo exception.

In 2020, the Trump administration **imposed sanctions** against officials of the International Criminal Court. Prosecutor Fatou Bensouda and senior prosecution official Phakiso Mochoko were placed under travel restrictions and an asset freeze because they were investigating possible U.S. war crimes in Afghanistan. This blacklisting of ICC investigators sent a chilling signal that the United States would attempt, much like a rogue authoritarian country, to obstruct justice at an international level. The Biden administration **has promised** to review these sanctions and will **likely lift them**.

A more vexing issue involves a war crimes investigation in the occupied Palestinian territories. Although the investigators looked at atrocities committed by both Israelis and Palestinians, both Israel and the United States condemned the investigation, arguing that Israel isn't a member of the ICC and so the international body lacks jurisdiction. But the ICC's jurisdiction is **quite clear**: it extends to crimes "committed by a State Party national, or in the territory of a State Party, or in a State that has accepted the jurisdiction of the Court." Palestine, an ICC member since 2015, requested the investigation. Meanwhile, the ICC has recently **begun to stand up to major powers**, such as the United States and Russia (for its actions in Georgia and Ukraine). The Obama administration cooperated with the ICC as a non-member, and the Biden administration could simply fall back on this option.

A democracy question that U.S. governments rarely address is the governance of international institutions like the World Bank and IMF. Although these institutions have taken steps to **improve transparency and**

accountability, their structures remain heavily tilted toward the United States and other Western countries. In the IMF, for instance, the United States commands 16.52 percent of the votes, more than twice what second-place Japan wields. And though China has an economy that **by some measures** is larger than the U.S., it has only a 6.09 share. India comes in at only 2.64. Although a majority of IMF members supported a redistribution of voting power at the last review, the quota system **remained unchanged because of U.S. opposition**. The next review will take place no later than 2023 and will offer the Biden administration an opportunity to change tack.

Where the United States has insisted on reform has been the UN Educational, Social, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), withdrawing funding in 2011 and cancelling membership in 2017 when such reform was not forthcoming. The United States has demanded that UNESCO end its “anti-Israel bias” and, in the past, has even insisted on auditing the organization’s finances. Some American analysts **have urged** the Biden administration to condition re-entry on a reduction in U.S. dues and the promotion of Americans in positions of leadership. Instead, the administration should focus on how UNESCO, with U.S. participation and assistance, can help foster **the scientific and educational cooperation** necessary to promote environmental sustainability and justice as well as democracy and human rights.

Regional Multilateralism

The United States has often avoided the choice between unilateral action and cooperation with UN bodies by focusing instead on working through regional multilateral institutions. The most obvious locus of U.S. attention has been the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), a security alliance designed to mobilize European partners during the Cold War against the actions of the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact allies but which also expanded after the end of the Cold War to conduct “out of area” operations to the east and south. Similarly, Washington has worked through the Organization of American States (OAS) to rally support for U.S. policies against Cuba, Venezuela, and other countries in Latin America and the Caribbean.

The United States has helped to create regional economic institutions as well, including the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation. Obama-era efforts to create the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade bloc and a Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) faltered when Trump blocked both, ending the TTIP and leading to the creation of a TPP without the United States.

On NATO, the Biden administration has moved quickly to reassure European allies that it will take a more cooperative approach than its predecessor. But the new administration will likely push similar policies without the verbal fireworks and blatant arm-twisting. For instance, Biden is as eager as Trump was to push NATO members to up their military spending to meet their 2 percent of GDP commitment. Certainly, the new administration will “consult together, decide together and act together” with its NATO partners, as Pentagon chief Lloyd Austin **has promised**, but it **will still push** Washington’s line on maintaining some forces in Afghanistan or elevating the priority of China on NATO’s list. Meanwhile, having witnessed the quicksilver nature of U.S. administrations over the years, European countries have gone forward in **developing their own relationships** with Russia and China, exemplified by Germany’s energy deals with Russia via the Nord Stream 2 pipeline and the **new EU-China trade deal** unveiled right at the end of 2020.

In Asia, the United States has long worked hard to assemble a united front against China by trying to push Japan and South Korea into tighter trilateral coordination, partnering with the Philippines and Vietnam to push back against Beijing in the South China Sea, and creating a larger chain of containment with allies India and Australia as part of what the Trump administration called “a free and open Indo-Pacific.” The Biden administration has indicated that it might **resurrect some version** of the Obama-era “Pacific pivot” by asserting the primacy of confronting China multilaterally rather than only bilaterally. To that end, it appointed Pacific Pivot architect Kurt Campbell to the newly created post of Indo-Pacific coordinator in the National Security Council and has promised to reengage in regional bodies like ASEAN, the ASEAN Regional Forum, the East Asian Summit, and the APEC forum, which the Trump administration **largely ignored**.

Neither Russia nor China will likely view the recourse to multilateralism as an improvement over the Trump years. Russia has spent considerable energy trying to encourage European disunity by supporting Euroskeptical parties and movements, and trying to drive a wedge in transatlantic relations through projects like Nord Stream 2. It has viewed the prevention of NATO expansion to Ukraine, Georgia, and other countries in its “near abroad” as a top priority. The Kremlin will view a more harmonious NATO as a step backward from the more unpredictable policies of Trump. China, similarly, will see the Biden administration’s efforts to build a more solid “Indo-Pacific” consensus as a more consistent containment threat than the piecemeal actions of the Trump administration. The decision of Beijing shortly after Biden’s election to join the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (which includes the countries of Southeast Asia plus Australia,

New Zealand, South Korea, and Japan) and Xi Jinping's announcement that China would also consider joining the modified TPP suggest an economic counteroffensive to the U.S. ramping up of multilateral security arrangements. Both economic agreements, which lack U.S. participation, underscore the reality that the United States remains a Pacific power largely through its military footprint in the region.

In Latin America, Biden faces longstanding suspicions about multilateralism – from sovereignists like Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil and Andrés Manuel López Obrador in Mexico, from right-wing authoritarian leaders like Ivan Duque in Colombia, Alejandro Giammattei in Guatemala, Juan Orlando Hernández in Honduras, and Nayib Bukele in El Salvador, from left-wing authoritarians like Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua, and from countries that have experienced U.S. sanctions campaigns like Cuba and Venezuela. Moreover, the legacy of Trump still hangs heavy over the region, particularly in the surge of economic activity by China, which is now the leading trading partner for South America. In 2019, Chinese companies increased their investments into regional infrastructure by **over 15 percent to \$12.8 billion**. “Trump literally built walls in the region while the Chinese built bridges,” economist Kevin Gallagher **points out**. “We’ve been telling folks not to take a cent from China but haven’t offered anything in return.”

Biden has won praise in the region for his reversals of Trump policies on immigration, such as stopping the construction of the southern wall with Mexico, ending the Remain in Mexico program, and canceling the “safe third country” agreements with Central American countries. To substitute for the latter, he has also promised to create **a \$4 billion regional plan** to address the root causes of migration in Central America, though without oversight that money may only disappear **through corruption** or **end up bolstering** repressive government policies. Dealing with climate change will also influence the administration's multilateral efforts in the region, particularly around protecting the Amazon, and may bring the administration into sharpened conflict with Bolsonaro in Brazil. Coordinating **a new campaign** to pressure Maduro to hold elections in Venezuela and cautiously reopening with Cuba are also on Biden's agenda for the region. Building on the good will generated by new immigration policies, the Biden administration has the best opportunity in Latin America, of all the regions of the world, to promote a new regional multilateralism, in this case **a new Good Neighbor Policy** “based on non-intervention, cooperation, and mutual respect.”

In his speech to the State Department on February 4, Biden didn't mention Africa. But the next day, he sent **a video message** to the African Union

Summit that emphasized his administration's commitment to multilateral institutions like the AU and the African CDC to address the pandemic, ongoing conflicts, trade, democracy, and human rights. In Africa, the administration faces the same challenge as in Latin America: the growth of Chinese trade and influence during the four-year absence of engagement under Trump. While the continent has also welcomed the changes in immigration policy under Biden, the renewed emphasis on democracy will likely complicate relations with some allies like Uganda and Equatorial Guinea. Counter-terrorism has driven U.S. policy toward Africa for more than two decades, and Biden's position is not yet clear. Although he froze Trump's removal of U.S. troops from Germany, he hasn't reversed the decision to remove 700 soldiers from Somalia. While some analysts **predict** a surge in U.S. military operations across the continent, the administration may simply not have the resources or the political will to push such an escalation.

Conclusion: Addressing the Problems of Multilateralism

The Biden administration has promised a return to diplomacy and engagement with multilateral institutions. At the same time, given Biden's history as a moderate Democrat well within the foreign policy mainstream, he carries a certain amount of American exceptionalism into office with him as well. The balance of these tendencies will resemble in many ways the way that Obama attempted to square the circle with his version of *a la carte* multilateralism.

But global circumstances have changed considerably since 2016. The pandemic and the ever-more-urgent climate crisis have made international cooperation indispensable and have also changed the debate on the availability of funding. The United States has lost some of its geopolitical weight, as a result of Trump's anti-globalism, the unpredictability of U.S. policy across administrations, and the increased global engagement of other countries, especially China. However much the new administration would like to return to the status quo ante, it will not be able to do so. The world has moved on.

Before looking at some of the key progressive policy asks around multilateralism, let's analyze three problems that will influence the trajectory of U.S. global engagement: the problem of the Senate, the problem of non-compliance, and the problem of global governance.

Presidents have considerable leeway in conducting foreign policy, as the rollout of executive orders over the last years has made plain. Presidents can pull the country in and out of international bodies and multilateral agreements. They can slap tariffs on countries and sanctions on foreign individuals. Despite the limitations of the War Powers Act, they can still wage war for a full two months without any congressional interference.

But the Biden administration does not have sole control over U.S. foreign policy. The Constitution gives the Senate the sole power to approve, by a two-thirds majority, any treaties that the United States might be considering. As with the filibuster, however, this treaty power has as much influence in its threatened use as in its actual deployment. As noted above, Kerry insisted on voluntary commitments in the Paris climate accords to avoid triggering a Senate vote. The Obama administration negotiated the Iran nuclear deal as an agreement, not a treaty, to avoid the two-thirds vote in the Senate. According to one academic study, presidents negotiated **nearly 4,000 executive agreements** between 1977 and 1996 but only 300 treaties.

With the slimmest of majorities in the Senate, the Democrats have little hope of bringing controversial treaties to a vote. Republican opposition will ensure that the Senate blocks many of the key methods of transforming the United States into a fully cooperate player in the multilateral system. In other words, under Biden, there is little chance that the United States will join the International Criminal Court, the UN Convention on the Law of the Seas, the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, the Convention on Biological Diversity, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, or the ILO convention protecting the right to organize trade unions, to name just six of the **37 treaties** that languish in Senate limbo.

American exceptionalism is practically embedded in the structure of U.S government since the Republican Party has historically refused to cede any measure of sovereignty to global institutions. Of course, the Biden administration will also face Republican opposition (and some pushback from conservative Democrats as well) at the legislative level—to his more comprehensive immigration policy, his version of a Green New Deal, and any major increases in funding for international authorities. Whether through treaties or legislation, the indifference to global norms and regulations shown by a noncompromising bloc of senators over the years represents the chief obstacle to a fully international United States.

A second challenge for multilateralism is non-compliance. If powerful countries don't want to abide by international rules, they simply don't. The

United States has demonstrated this problem of non-compliance repeatedly over the years, most recently on drone warfare and refugee policy. Russia in Crimea and China in the South China Sea have also flouted international law. Even relatively weak countries have managed to defy international agreements and authorities, as North Korea has done in developing its nuclear weapons program. Non-compliance triggers penalties such as economic sanctions, but countries are often willing to absorb those penalties.

This problem of non-compliance will become ever more salient on environmental questions. Many governments have pledged to become carbon neutral by 2050. But there are no enforcement mechanisms to keep countries to their word. Nor are there international authorities to pressure countries into making those pledges in the first place. As an aspect of the collective action problem, non-compliance is a feature of multilateralism across the board, whether non-proliferation, pandemic suppression, or the treatment of public commons like the oceans, cyberspace, or outer space. But with the Doomsday Clock of *The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* **still a mere 100 second from midnight**, non-compliance carries with it unprecedented existential risks for the human race.

Finally, there is the problem of governance. There is no global government and thus no democratic way to regulate global affairs. Multilateralism is one response to this problem of governance. It asserts that governments, as the representatives of their people, cooperate on a state-to-state basis to solve collective problems. Governments pool their resources to address a crisis; they contribute soldiers to peacekeeping forces; they provide judges and lawyers to participate in international court cases. The United Nations is a global institution but it's more like a forum than a government, for it has no taxation authority or independent army or autonomous capacity to enforce its decisions.

Largely absent from this inter-state arrangement are civil society organizations, municipal authorities, corporations, and other intermediate institutions, though they sometimes hold consultative status in international fora. One alternative to emerge in recent years is multistakeholderism, **which seeks to** "bring together global actors that have a potential 'stake' in an issue and ask them to collaboratively sort out a solution." These arrangements, which bring together government, civil society, and business in "public-private" configurations, have their own flaws. They often leave out critical voices, fail to address significant power differentials among the stakeholders, and gloss over questions of accountability. Of course, these governance problems can be found at virtually every level of authority from the smallest community group to the UN Security Council.

All three of these problems will directly affect the Biden administration and its take on multilateralism. Restated in terms of prescriptions, the new administration would be well advised to address the central question of sovereignty as it has been understood by Senate opponents of key multilateral treaties. It should pay close attention not just to statements of intent to participate in multilateral agreements but to mechanisms that penalize non-compliance. And it should spend at least a portion of the energy it devotes to democracy summits and the like to an investigation of how multilateral governance can be made more democratic: in UN bodies, in international financial institutions like the World Bank, or in multistakeholder arrangements like COVAX.

Given the various constraints on a progressive internationalism—the residual American exceptionalism in the Biden administration, opposition from the Senate and other sources within the United States, and the challenges within the multilateral project itself—where should progressives put their energies over the next two to four years?

There is no substitute for pushing for a major, comprehensive shift in U.S. foreign policy in the direction of progressive internationalism. But as progressives work on this long-term project, here are some more immediate campaigns that might prove successful in at least nudging the United States along that trajectory. Progressives can and should push the Biden administration to:

- join with Europe immediately to provide vaccines to Africa, ideally in as broad a multilateral fashion as possible;
- provide the full \$9 billion to the Green Climate Fund;
- expand Special Drawing Rights at the IMF, increase the use of climate-debt instruments, and renegotiate trade agreements to eliminate ISDS provisions;
- work in concert with a global array of actors to end the war in Yemen and rebuild the country;
- reenter the Iran nuclear deal with some compensation for Iraq for the last four years of sanctions;
- identify a new arms control agenda with Russia and negotiate new environmental projects with China;

- lift Trump-era sanctions on the ICC and cooperate with the organization on its investigations;
- rejoin and restore funding to UNESCO;
- launch a new Good Neighbor Policy toward Latin America.

These initiatives would build on the promises and initial executive orders of the Biden Administration. They would bring the United States in greater harmony with international norms and agreements. They would constitute leadership by example, not by force or by empty rhetoric. And they would serve as a down payment on more resolute U.S. participation in creating stronger, more equitable, and more democratic multilateral structures at the international and regional level.

