Commentary
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Diplomacy in Decline: The Biden Administration Stuck in the Bygone Era

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Summary

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has offered a summary of the Biden administration's foreign policy achievements as its term draws to a close. Unsurprisingly, he framed the administration's efforts as a string of successes. However, the reality of Washington's foreign policy over the past few years tells a different story, marked by a lack of major accomplishments. The core issue lies in the fact that Biden and his team have been attempting to implement a diplomatic strategy rooted in outdated thinking—one that fails to match the realities of today's world.

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With just three and a half months remaining in the Biden administration's term, *Foreign Affairs* published an extensive article reviewing its foreign policy track record. The article's author is none other than Antony Blinken, who has served as Secretary of State throughout the entirety of Biden's presidency.

Blinken begins his piece by stating the central theme of contemporary global politics: "A fierce competition is underway to define a new age in international affairs." This assertion is clear and hard to dispute. In this context, how does the head of American diplomacy assess the position of the United States and Washington's achievements since 2021, when he and his colleagues in the Democratic administration took the reins of government from the Republicans?

“A much stronger geopolitical position”?

In summarizing the results of his diplomatic efforts, Blinken claims that the “Biden administration’s strategy has put the United States in a much stronger geopolitical position today than it was four years ago.” It is clear that the current Secretary of State has political motives for this statement, even though he published it in a journal traditionally known for its intellectual depth. He likely wishes to be remembered favourably by the American public and to enhance Kamala Harris’s chances in the upcoming elections by highlighting the accomplishments of the outgoing administration.

> However, the assertion of a “much stronger geopolitical position” stands in stark contrast to reality and obvious facts, evoking surprise and even frustration.

It is not surprising that a debate is gaining traction within the American expert community regarding whether a collapse is occurring in a core idea of American foreign policy—the notion of deterring geopolitical competitors from making decisions unfavourable to Washington. The theoretical and practical dimensions of this discussion are not as straightforward as they may appear; they require thorough professional analysis. Nevertheless, when viewed through a broader lens, the conclusion seems clear.

For decades, particularly following the end of the Cold War, American policymakers have grown accustomed to the idea that, in most cases, mere words were sufficient to influence the behaviour of both allies and adversaries. Washington could often achieve desired outcomes from foreign governments in various parts of the world through verbal demands. If words alone fell short, they could always be bolstered by inexpensive signalling of readiness to act—such as deploying an aircraft carrier strike group or imposing symbolic targeted sanctions as a warning that more severe sectoral restrictions could follow.

This approach, however, was not universally effective. There were always exceptions. In those rare cases, Washington was forced to either resort to more radical methods of coercion or ignore certain situations as not significantly relevant to American interests. Yet, as the saying goes, these exceptions merely confirmed the rule. That rule was one of the United States’ unchallenged unilateral dominance in global affairs, spanning the entire globe.

In recent years, the world has clearly observed a shift in the geopolitical landscape. This transformation did not happen overnight. The process of change began long before Biden took office and Blinken assumed the role of Secretary of State, and it will continue after the current administration departs, regardless of who succeeds it. However, it is precisely the "Biden administration's strategy," which, according to Blinken, "has put the United States in a much stronger geopolitical position," that has coincided with the most apparent challenges Washington has faced in years as a superpower.

> Biden's presidency will be remembered as the time when the limitations of American geopolitical influence transitioned from theoretical discussion to practical reality.

Several instances illustrate this point, particularly moments when President Biden issued loud and public warnings to the world, exclaiming, "Don't do this!" and threatening severe consequences for those he addressed. For example, he warned Russia against initiating military operations in Ukraine in February 2022, and he cautioned Iran against launching missile strikes on Israel in April 2024. In both cases, the exact opposite occurred. Moreover, over the past year, Biden and his administration have attempted to impose various restrictions on Israel, but their words have simply been ignored.

This does not mean, of course, that Washington's ability to deter unwanted events and decisions from other states has completely eroded. In relative terms, the United States remains the most powerful nation in the world and is capable of a great deal. However, the negative geopolitical dynamics are evident, particularly in light of numerous ill-considered actions and strategically questionable decisions made by the outgoing administration.

The examples provided, which have led to serious international crises, are certainly enough to challenge the assertion of a "much stronger geopolitical position" for the United States under the Biden administration.

As if we're back in the 1990s...

Even if the assertion of a "much stronger geopolitical position" for the United States reflects a pre-election facade, it represents a dangerous illusion that is being imposed on public opinion—dangerous primarily for the US itself and, given America's role in international affairs, for the entire world. In this context, it is important to agree with another of Blinken's points: the policy Washington pursues in the second half of "this decisive decade" will have significant global implications.

> Therefore, it is crucial for American elites to quickly come to terms with the real capabilities of the US in an increasingly fast-changing world.

For decades, Washington's influence was rooted in the immense geopolitical and geostrategic power of the United States, which no one could seriously question. As a result, no one truly attempted to do so for a long time.

Due to the substantial "margin of error" of the superpower, it seemed that nothing could threaten its dominance in the short and even medium term. Its room for manoeuvre was vast, and its capabilities so varied that no challenges appeared critical for a long time, and no management errors were perceived as potentially dangerous. However, nothing in life is eternal, including the power dynamics in the international system. Time flows relentlessly. Small, unnoticed mistakes gradually accumulate to a critical mass, eventually outweighing the superpower's unlimited capabilities. At the same time, numerous countries that are dissatisfied with the status quo are increasingly acting to defend their interests—particularly those that either perceive existential threats from the prevailing dynamics or see an opportunity to seize leadership and dominance.

Such processes have clearly surfaced during the closing months of Biden's presidency. This, it should be emphasized, is a historical inevitability. International relations have witnessed similar cyclical processes repeatedly in the past and will continue to do so in the future. The key practical question that will determine the trajectory of the cycle is this: Can the status quo superpower recognize and accept the changing realities in the world in a timely manner and adapt its policies accordingly?

This is where the United States, under Biden's leadership, appears to have encountered difficulties. On the one hand, American doctrinal documents clearly reflect an understanding that the dominant position of the US in the world is no longer a guaranteed certainty.

> On the other hand, in most foreign policy directions, the outgoing administration acted as if it were still the 1990s.

In other words, it seemed as if the increasingly acute problems were not the result of large-scale structural transformations in international relations that required corresponding changes in Washington's foreign and military policies. Instead, they were viewed as stemming from insufficient American activity and a lack of vigour in implementing the same agenda as in the good old 1990s. Consequently, rather than deeply rethinking American strategy in line with the realities of the 2020s, the

administration of the 46th president simply tried to double down on outdated approaches. It was as if time, along with the structural changes occurring in the world, could be reversed.

What happened to the Summit for Democracy?

Blinken refers to this approach as the "American strategy of renewal." However, behind these grand words lies an analytical and worldview error characterized by an inadequate assessment of the existing realities and the United States' ability to influence them. This can be illustrated by the idea that Biden presented as a cornerstone of his foreign policy initiative during the 2020 electoral campaign.

In an article for *Foreign Affairs* in January 2020, then-presidential candidate Biden explained his vision: "The triumph of democracy and liberalism over fascism and autocracy created the free world. But this contest does not just define our past. It will define our future, as well."

> It was within this framework that the idea for the Summit for Democracy emerged—the initiative aimed to reinvigorate the coalition of countries and peoples around democratic values.

In essence, democracies led by the US were expected to unite against autocracies led by China. In a Hollywood interpretation of this geopolitical vision, all the "good" should come together against all the "bad."

Despite the appeal of the slogan, this initiative from the Biden administration was fundamentally out of step with the times and the current international landscape. As I noted earlier in discussing the significance of the ongoing revolutionary changes in the world, during periods of active transformation in the system of international relations, ideology inevitably takes a backseat, often to second or even third place. In such conditions, realpolitik is shaped not by value-based perspectives and grand ideas but by a constant and cynical calculation of risks and opportunities. This is a demand of the times, and to ignore it is to commit a serious managerial error—which is precisely what occurred with the Biden administration.

After all the grand slogans and the initial fanfare surrounding the online gatherings of the two Summits for Democracy, the initiative seems to have been all but forgotten. The third summit, held in South Korea in March of this year, took place with so little

attention that it barely registered on anyone's radar. Now, in a telling move, Blinken mentions the summit idea only once in his lengthy article, and even then, he quickly adds that "democracies can't be the United States' only partners."

As the saying goes, better late than never. However, due to the initiatives from Biden, Blinken, and their team that were out of sync with the times, the US has missed numerous opportunities to revive genuine diplomacy. This applies not only to Washington's main geopolitical adversaries but also to smaller states across various regions of the globe, where tensions are currently running high. All this despite Biden's 2020 promise that "diplomacy should be the first instrument of American power". One can only hope that the next American administration will be more relevant to the contemporary world.

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