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Joe Biden's incompetence

During an impromptu encounter with the press at an airport the other day, a correspondent shouted at President Biden over the howls of jet engines, “Are the air strikes in Yemen working?” America’s commander-in-chief, evidently in his usual state of befuddlement, replied without thinking, “Well, when you say ‘working,’ are they stopping the Houthis? No. Are they going to continue? Yes.”

Let us consider those 11 seconds, recorded in a video that can be viewed [here](#). I am especially eager for Europeans and non-Americans in general to see this brief segment, as it reveals things about the world’s most powerful political figure that may not be so apparent from a distance. There is the extent to which Biden lives and moves in a fog, for instance—his fundamental incompetence. There is his native stupidity in matters to do with international relations, his dimness—I do not know how else to put this—and the nonsense that often results. In that brief exchange we can identify the president’s inability to shift from a fixed, and I would say mindless course in his foreign policies—as if his intent is to do the same thing over and over (to cite the familiar wisdom) and expect a different result.

Most Americans are very well aware of Joe Biden’s physical decline and ever-more-obvious mental deterioration. It is too plain to miss at this point. In a more balanced polity he would be considered unfit for office. But these matters are spoken or written of very seldom and always obliquely, because the liberal

authoritarians who control American media remain determined that he should be reelected to office this coming November. This makes him a perfect case of the emperor who presents himself in public with no clothes. Biden is straight out of Hans Christian Anderson.

I have long wondered, however, whether Biden's condition is legible from across one or another ocean. And I would say legible to others but also fully understood. The Biden regime's shocking indifference as American institutions decay and social and economic inequality worsens is bitter enough. But on the foreign policy side of the ledger his incompetence is more than bitter. It is perilous. At this point it puts the world, all of it, in danger of another world war, this one involving several nuclear-armed powers.

Let me make a short list of the Biden regime's most destructive foreign policy misjudgments. Across the Pacific, his national security people alienated the Chinese two months after Biden took office, when they scolded senior Chinese officials about the usual American complaints—democracy, a free press, human rights, and so on—as if the People's Republic were a third-rate power prepared to take instruction from the West. They have since imposed export controls intended to weaken the Chinese economy in sectors where it is most competitive, while provoking Beijing on the Taiwan question too many times to count.

Across the Atlantic, the Biden regime destroyed the Nord Stream pipeline two years ago this autumn—an affront to European sovereignty that surely worsened the Continent's long if quiet alienation from the U.S. There is the wholly

unnecessary crisis in relations with Russia and the disastrous war in Ukraine. Now Biden has led the U.S. into a conflict spreading through West Asia—this in support of Israel’s genocide against the Palestinians of Gaza. There is, more generally, Biden’s division of the world into democracies and autocracies and his claim to lead the former in a war against the latter: Who can take this the slightest bit seriously?

This is a mere pencil sketch, but I will leave it there. It is enough to assert that the Biden foreign policy’s most salient characteristic is its consistent irrationality. The question is how we can account for this.

To begin at the beginning, we must ask whether Joe Biden is actually responsible for the policies to which his name is assigned. There are a few commentators in America who put his name in quotation marks, as in “Biden’s” China policy, or the posture “Biden” has assumed *vis-à-vis* the Russian Federation. The implication here is that President Biden is not actually in charge of his administration’s foreign policies. He is a figurehead who presents these policies to Americans and the world while his national security people determine them.

This is a thesis, not more, as U.S. administrations have become ever more opaque, and so hard to see into, for many years. But there is good reason to take this thesis seriously, as there is a lengthy history to support it. Ronald Reagan was the first president in modern times, I would say, whose purpose was clearly to articulate policy rather than shape it. So was Reagan known as “the Great Communicator.” Bush II, the administration of George W. Bush, 2001 to 2009, repeated this pattern.

Bush himself was an amateur. Policy was set by Vice-President Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, the defense secretary, and a clique of neoconservatives such as Paul Wolfowitz, who advocated “full-spectrum dominance”—empire, in plain English, an objective no administration since has abandoned.

Biden’s national-security assistants are led by three figures who appear to play the same roles. These are Secretary of State Blinken, National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan, and CIA Director William Burns. With the exception of Burns, the problem with these people is their professional competence. Blinken and Sullivan are neoliberal ideologues ungiven to thought who spent their careers before 2021 in advisory roles. Their current positions are their first involving executive responsibilities, and they are floundering badly.

There is one further point to make about the Bush II regime. It was Cheney and Rumsfeld, in the post-September 11 years, who, along with other neoconservatives, architected an appallingly hubristic set of foreign policies that incessantly ignored international law and turned the U.S. into what it is now: an uncertain, desperately defensive nation in its late-imperial phase that is the primary source of the global disorder that now confronts all of us. This is not to excuse any of the messes Biden or “Biden” have made. It is merely to give them a history.

The true topic here—and, like Biden’s personal incompetence, it is mentioned rarely and obliquely in mainstream American media—is the presence and the power of the Deep State as an unelected, profoundly undemocratic force in governing the U.S. and setting its foreign policies. For a long time I found myself

cautious in my use of this term. I am no longer. The Deep State and its influence is a reality I think urgent to bring to the attention of *Global Bridge*'s readers. In various respects it intrudes on the polities of Europeans and other non-Americans as much as it does on regimes such as Biden's.

Jeffery Sachs, the noted scholar and commentator, addressed these questions in [a piece published in *Common Dreams*](#) on 15 January. Under the headline, "Why Joe Biden is a foreign policy failure," Sachs goes back to the Eisenhower years to explain what we see out our windows today. He cites Eisenhower's famous speech on the reality of the military-industrial complex, delivered as he moved out of the White House in January 1961 and John F. Kennedy moved in. Here is Sachs looking forward from that moment:

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Sixty years onward, the MIC has an iron grip on American foreign policy.... Foreign policy has become an insider racket, with the MIC in control of the White House, Pentagon, State Department, the Armed Services Committees of the Congress, and of course the CIA, all in a tight embrace with the major arms contractors. Only an exceptional president could resist the endless war-profiteering of this mammoth war machine.

Alas, Biden doesn't even try. Throughout his long political career, Biden has been supported by the MIC and has in turn enthusiastically supported wars of choice, massive arms sales, CIA-backed coups, and NATO enlargement.

Biden's 2024 military budget breaks all records, reaching at least \$1.5

trillion in outlays for the Pentagon, CIA, homeland security, non-Pentagon nuclear arms programs, subsidized foreign weapons sales, other military-linked outlays, and interest payments on past war-related debts. On top of this mountain of military spending, Biden is seeking an additional \$50 billion in ‘Emergency supplemental funding’ for America’s “defense industrial base” to keep shipping munitions to Ukraine and Israel.

These observations put Biden’s evident incompetence in a perspective it is critical to understand. We must ask if his various shortcomings, mental and intellectual—even his unworthiness to hold office—do not make him precisely the kind of president the policy cliques, the MIC Sachs cites, and the Deep State altogether prefer. We must ask whether an imperium in its late phase needs a figurehead to (mis)represent the realities of empire more than it needs an inspiring leader capable of rallying the citizenry and other nations by way of stirring visions of a better world. We must ask whether Joe Biden sets America’s course, or whether we mean the collective authority known as “Joe Biden.”

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