

Opinion **US foreign policy**

Joe Biden is right to go to Saudi Arabia

The west is in a struggle against some autocracies, not 'autocracy'

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Then vice-president Joe Biden with then Prince Salman in Riyadh in 2011. If Biden's chill on US-Saudi relations was ever sensible, he wouldn't be in the process of undoing it © Hassan Ammar/AP

Janan Ganesh 12 HOURS AGO

Tariffs are wrong. The US should continue its role as security guarantor of the free world. Truth is objective and not relative or “constructed”.

That is a far from exhaustive list of the epiphanies that some progressives waited until the Donald Trump years to have. The former US president's underrated gift to politics was, at least on some issues, a better, harder-headed left.

[Saudi Arabia](#) wasn't one of them. Here, the itch to oppose Trump, who courted the kingdom, boxed the left into a position of impractical righteousness. Joe Biden called it a “pariah state” for killing a Virginia-resident journalist and dissident. He has snubbed the crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman, who could plausibly govern his country for the next half-century. Eighteen months into his administration, America has no permanent ambassador in Riyadh.

There is real conscience here: about the murder, about the uses to which US arms sales are put. But if Biden's chill on US-Saudi relations was ever sensible, he wouldn't be in the sheepish and entirely foreseeable process of undoing it. He wouldn't face the ignominy of a visit to the huge oil producer — perhaps next month — to coax it into [easing supply](#).

Biden should not just defrost US relations with Saudi Arabia. He should use the moment to give us an entire new way of framing the modern world. The west is locked in a

moment to give up an entire way of framing the modern world. The west is locked in a struggle against two specific autocracies. Not, as some would have it, against “autocracy”. The challenge from Russia and China (US Republicans would name Iran as a third) is daunting enough without volunteering for a showdown with a complete mode of government. As during the cold war, in fact, countries that practise it will have to be enlisted to the US side of the superpower conflict.

This month, the former US diplomat Ivo Daalder and former Nato secretary-general Anders Fogh Rasmussen proposed an [“economic Article 5”](#). Like Nato’s collective defence clause, it would trigger a unified response from an “alliance of democracies” when any one of them were subject to economic coercion.

It is a beguiling and even stirring idea. It would have helped Australia as China pressured it during the coronavirus pandemic. But it has no place, presumably, for Saudi oil or Algerian natural gas. It would have to decide how much use it could make in good conscience of Brazilian agribusiness while that nation is under populist sway.

Against such pickiness, one could cite the common cause the Allies made with Stalin against Hitler, or the *caudillos* whom the US cultivated in the cold war. But it isn’t necessary to ransack another century for cases of fruitful moral compromise. It isn’t even necessary to leave the past decade or the Arabian peninsula.

If the US has been able to worry a tad less about the Middle East of late, it is because of the [new accords](#) between democratic Israel and the conservative monarchies of the United Arab Emirates. Biden’s strict account of the world’s defining faultline as “democracies and autocracies” wouldn’t allow for these. It was under the auspices of his amoral predecessor that the accords were formalised.

The will and fibre of the west are what is always doubted. But it is its subtlety and cynicism that are more often wanting. Biden has suffered and profited from this strange discrepancy. His withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 is still abhorred as the act of a dilettante, as though the US had committed 12 months and not 20 years to the place. For letting conscience pall relations with Saudi Arabia, a US ally for longer than he has been alive, and one with an alternative suitor in China, he has received a fraction of the scrutiny.

Even as he unpicks that decision, grudgingly, a view of the west’s challenger as autocracy *tout court* will lead him to make others like it. Better retire that vision than try and fail to honour it.

A generation has passed since George W Bush allowed a specific attack by al-Qaeda to

set off a war against “terror”. The US is still recovering from the over-reach. It is useful, no doubt, to define one’s enemy in philosophic and not particular terms. It seems less vindictive. It is a more rousing call to action for citizens and foreign allies. But it is also too much to live up to.

Perhaps the west, if it doesn’t want to say “Russia and China”, can define what it sets itself against as violators of territorial sovereignty, or disrupters of the rules-based order. But it can’t be the autocratic world in the abstract. Too much of it, as Biden may bashfully allow in the desert this summer, is too useful.

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