

Opinion **US foreign policy**

The Ukraine war is not about democracy versus autocracy

The US will need the help of some illiberal states to prevail over Russia and China

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Joe Biden has been likened of late to Harry Truman © Patrick Semansky/AP

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There is no discreet and low-key way of sending the Patriot antimissile system to another country, but Joe Biden is nothing if not a trier. The US president has left it to unnamed officials in his administration to confirm that [Saudi Arabia](#) has taken receipt of these monstrous, truck-mounted interceptors. You can quite understand the sheepishness. In 2019, he promised to make the journalist-killing kingdom a “pariah”. Just this month, he framed the modern world as a “battle between democracies and autocracies”.

What is glaring here is not Biden’s failure to live up to [his ideals](#). It is the untenability of the ideals. Even when the US had a nuclear monopoly and a vast share of world economic output, it had to cut moral corners to fight communism in the nascent cold war. It only went so far in de-Nazifying postwar Germany, for instance. It sponsored the monarchist forces in the Greek civil war. It connived in autocratic rule in South Korea and Latin America. As a less dominant power than it was in the mid-20th century, it would be an odd time for the US to develop a new choosiness about its allies.

Biden can lead the US to success in the present crisis, if he is clear about its

parameters. The enemy is not an abstraction called “autocracy”. It is a specific aggressor in a defined territorial conflict. Inducing a change in its behaviour might be possible, but it is likely to require the co-operation of the oil-rich Saudis, the strategically located Turkey and a Chinese state that has the wherewithal to [cushion Russia](#) against sanctions. That none of these countries are liberal democracies doesn’t reduce their circumstantial usefulness.

If the US has to be cynical in the coming months, it should regard this as so much practice for the coming decades. Vietnam scores [19 out of 100](#) in the Freedom House index, which puts it level with Russia and below Rwanda. But it also looks with some apprehension at China, America’s rival, across the border. No serious US leader can pass up a potential friendship of convenience with Hanoi on account of its domestic [model of government](#). So why the pretence otherwise? At best, it sets an impossible moral bar that, when flunked, earns the US a reputation for hypocrisy. At worst, it makes the classic Chinese offer to third countries — economic patronage without moral strings — ever more tempting.

America’s parallel struggles against Russia and China come together in the terrain of Saudi Arabia. Given the slaughter of journalist and US resident [Jamal Khashoggi](#) in 2018, Biden’s refusal to speak to the crown prince Mohammed bin Salman has strong moral grounds. But it also has consequences. One is a certain amount of Saudi foot-dragging on the immediate question of oil production. The other, farther away but nearing all the time, is the prospect of a Beijing-facing rather than Washington-facing kingdom. The prince used a [recent interview](#) with The Atlantic to remind the west that his country lacks many things, but not options.

The oddity of Washington as a diplomatic capital is that it is so embarrassed about what it does best: realpolitik. There is none of the delight in the cold pursuit of interest that marks out London and Paris, to say nothing of Moscow. The scholar [John Mearsheimer](#) is as prominent as he is because he is one of the few declared cynics.

Washington’s determination to think well of itself sometimes goes as far as misremembering the cold war. Biden has been likened of late to Harry Truman, who said the US would “support free peoples” all over the world. But the [Truman Doctrine](#) was really the Truman Aspiration or even the Truman Metaphor. The reality is that America had to be pragmatic to the point of amorality between 1945 and 1989-91. Pretending otherwise now is understandable enough as a piece of rhetoric. The danger is that a generation of policymakers actually comes to believe the wholesome cant that America saw off the Soviets by “standing up for its values”, or some such,

and tries to repeat the trick today.

The cold war was not a clash between freedom and its opposite. The enemy was a specific empire, and the forces that America assembled against it encompassed at various times secular dictators, theocrats, military juntas, partial democracies, absolute monarchs and [Red China itself](#). The strategic aim could not have been more noble. The tactics were almost nihilist in their flexibility. The west is going to have to make the same distinction between ends and means for decades to come. It is a game for which the US has some talent, whether or not it can bring itself to say so.

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